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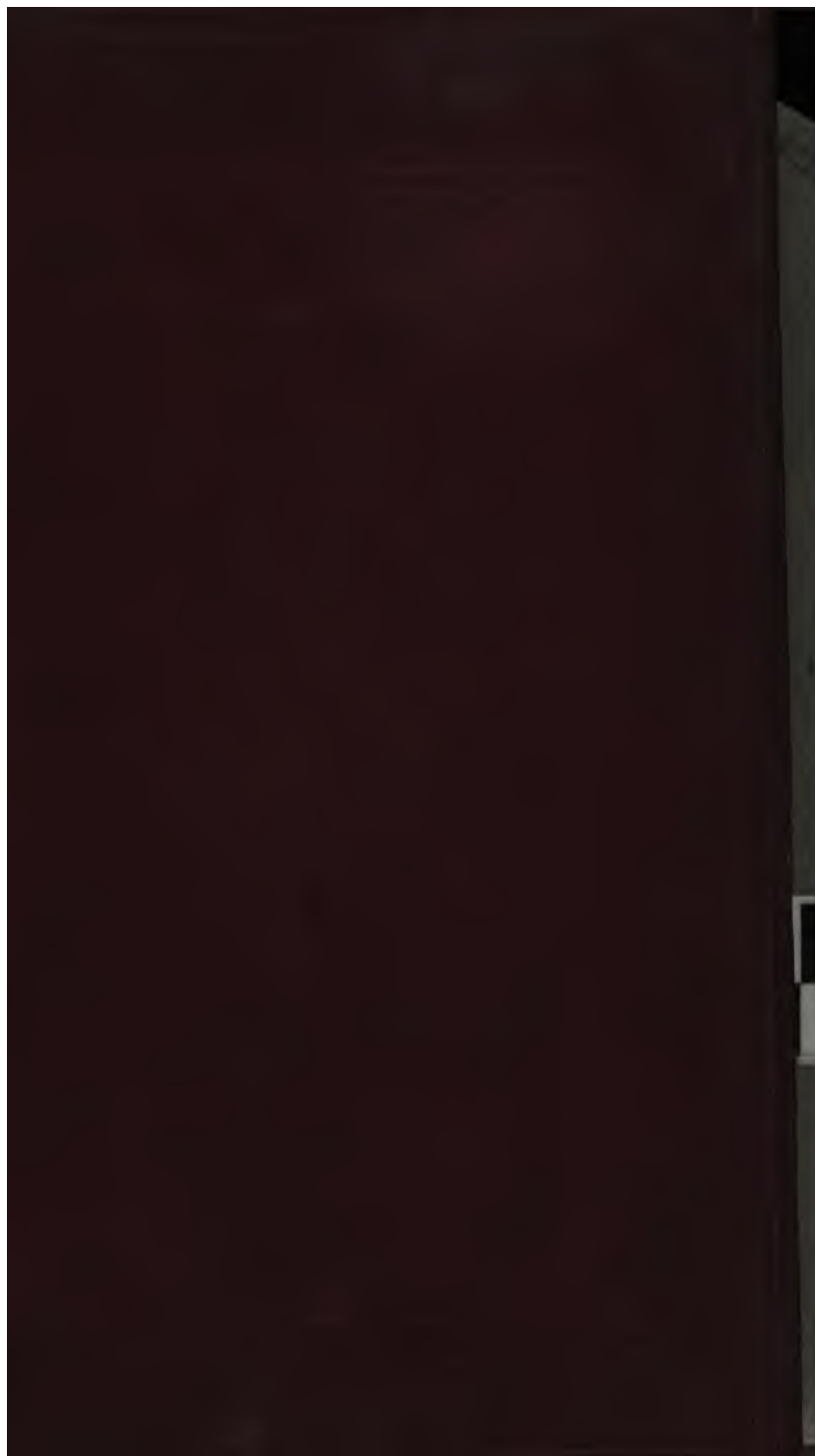
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# VERONICA

A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"AUNT MARGARET'S TROUBLE," "MABEL'S PROGRESS,"  
&c. &c.

*Reprinted from "ALL THE YEAR ROUND."*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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# VERONICA.

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## BOOK I.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### A NEW VICAR FOR SHIPLEY.

THE Church Intelligence announced one day, much to the fluttering of the village of Shipley, and also to the fluttering of some disappointed hearts in clerical breasts, that the Reverend Charles Levincourt was presented to the vacant living of Shipley-in-the-Wold.

The Reverend Charles Levincourt was presented to the living of Shipley-in-the-Wold by Sir William Delaney, to whose only son he had been tutor.



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Shipley-in-the-Wold. No one save her father knew that it was Clara who had asked and obtained this boon.

But she had said to Sir William in her quiet sweet voice, "Papa, James had a letter the other day from Mr. Levincourt. He has not succeeded in getting appointed to the foreign chaplaincy he was trying for. His wife has just had a little girl. I am afraid they are very poor. I wish you would promise him the next presentation to Shipley. You could not do better. He is so clever and so learned, and—and he was very good to James, papa dear."

In this way, the Reverend Charles Levincourt became vicar of Shipley-in-the-Wold.

## CHAPTER II.

### SHIPLEY VICARAGE.

THE small and obscure village of Shipley-in-the-Wold stands in one of the westernmost of the midland counties.

Its name was given in days before the whole of that part of England had been marked by the plough and spade, like a page by the tracings of a pen. Generation after generation has left its sign-manual on the face of the land: each writing the record of its labours in straight furrows on many a fertile field: furrows effaced and changed and renewed, from season to season, and from age to age, as are the waving ripples on a seaside sand, washed by the eternal tides.

A stretch of furze-grown common is, perhaps, the only remnant of that characteristic aspect of the country which gave Shipley its distinctive appellation.

There are wide, flat meadows all round about it, where herds of cattle graze on the dew-fed grass. The principal farms in the immediate neighbourhood of Shipley-in-the-Wold are grazing farms. All the land is flat and monotonous as far as the eye can see; save to the westward, where the horizon line is broken by a range of low turf-covered hills, called by the inhabitants of those parts, emphatically, "*the Hills*." Behind "*the Hills*" lies another Shipley; Shipley Magna, a tiny market town.

If it could be reached by a direct line cut through one swelling green mound, Shipley Magna would not be more than two or three miles distant from Shipley-in-the-Wold. But the road winds about and over the hills; and it is six miles from the village to the town. Southward the landscape grows prettier and more smiling. There are trees, and there is arable land where, in summer, wide fields of sunburnt grain wave, and rock, and change colour in the breeze, as a face pales or flushes at a sudden whisper.

But Shipley-in-the-Wold only beholds these things from afar. The stretch of furze-grown common already mentioned, and beyond that, a considerable extent of oozy marshland, separate it from the smiling southern country.

In the winter season, bleak winds sweep scythe-winged over Shipley; the snow lies deep about it; and often a single track of hoofs, and wheels, and feet may be traced in long black lines and uncouth dots, for miles across the otherwise unbroken whiteness of the level.

The village straggles over a considerable extent of ground, but its houses are few and its population is scanty. There is nothing which can be called a main street belonging to it. The dwellings stand scattered irregularly; here a cottage, and there a cottage, and each one is set within its own little patch of kitchen-garden. The place is remote from any great centre of commerce and activity. No railway passes near it. Twenty miles to the southward, among the trees and the corn-fields, lies the cathedral city of Danecester; with its bishop, and its dean, and its minster, and many other civilising and excellent institutions. But Danecester is, after all, but a silent, sleepy, old-fashioned city; and it wots little, and cares less, about poor little Shipley out on the bleak, wind-swept flats.

There is a very ancient church in Shipley; a low-roofed, stone church with round arches, pillars of disproportionate thickness, and a square, squat tower. It has a deep porch, to



enter which you descend two steps from the graveyard. The labouring centuries have piled their dust high around the massive masonry of St. Gildas's church, and the level of the outside earth is considerably above that of the stone pavement within the little temple.

The graveyard is enclosed by a low wall, and its gateway is a relic of antiquity coeval with the church itself. The said gateway is of hewn stone, with a projecting penthouse roof, and beneath it on one side is a large stone slab, cracked, weather-stained, and half sunk into the earth. Here, in the old time, the coffin-bearers were wont to set down their burthen, and a preliminary prayer for the dead was said before entering the churchyard.

There is no beauty in St. Gildas's graveyard. It lies defenceless and exposed to every wild north-easterly gale that sweeps over the flats. Its clustered mounds are turf-grown. Sheep graze there sometimes in summer. The few gravestones, as yet undefaced by time and weather, bear humble names of yeomen and peasants, born, living, and dying, at Shipley, generation after generation.

There are some rank flaunting marigolds growing beside the porch, and a sickly-hued

chrysanthemum raises its head to peer over the low rough wall of the graveyard. Other growth, save nettles, dock leaves, and dank, shadow-loving, nameless weeds, there is none.

Hard by the church stands the vicarage house. It is a lonely dwelling. There is no habitation of any kind within a mile of it: none above the rank of a peasant's cottage within two miles. Shipley vicarage is either not old enough or too old, to be picturesque. It was built in the middle of what may be termed, emphatically, the ugly age; the period, namely, during which the four Georges successively occupied the throne of these realms. It is a nearly square house of yellowish-brown brick. Its rooms are oblong and rectangular, its windows mean, its staircases narrow. There is no break or relief in the flat wall-surfaces, nor in the blank desert of the whitewashed ceilings.

Behind the house extends a large garden, the high wall of which skirts a bye-lane branching from the main high-road to Shipley Magna. In front is a lawn, cut in two by a long straight gravel path that leads from an iron wicket in the box hedge, up to the hall door. This lawn is only divided by a paddock from St. Gildas's churchyard.

Two quivering poplars whisper to each other and nod mysteriously from either side of the iron gate: and the windows of the lower rooms in the front of the house are darkened by clumps of evergreens, among which an old yew-tree rises gloomily conspicuous.

The vicarage faces due south, and looks across the common and the marsh, to where tufty woodlands break the level, and hide the distant spires of Danecester.

The Reverend Charles Levincourt, vicar of St. Gildas, arrived to take possession of his new home on a dreary day in the latter autumn; when the rain dripped sadly from the sombre evergreens, and low, lead-coloured clouds were melting into slant showers over the common.

"It is not a hopeful scene," said he, as he looked about him, and shivered.

He afterwards saw the scene under a countless variety of aspects; but that first dispiriting impression of Shipley struck the keynote of the place, and became an abiding under-tone, sounding through all subsequent changes.

## CHAPTER III.

## A WARD.

MR. LEVINCOURT had been established some years at Shipley, when one day he received a letter from the junior partner in a London firm of solicitors, Frost and Lovegrove, informing him that he (the Reverend Charles Levincourt, vicar of Shipley-in-the-Wold) had been appointed co-executor with the writer (Augustus Lovegrove) of the will of the late Mrs. Desmond, relict of Sidney Power Desmond, Esquire, formerly of Desmond Court, county Cork ; and further requesting the vicar's presence in town as soon as might be.

Communication between the country clergyman and the family of his old pupil had long since worn away and died out. The old pupil himself had died, at five-and-twenty ; his sorrowing father had not long survived him ; and this was the first intimation Charles

•

Levincourt received of the widowhood and death of his old love.

He journeyed without delay to London, and saw Mr. Lovegrove. The latter informed him that their joint responsibility, as regarded the administration of Mrs. Desmond's will, would not be an onerous one: the property she had had to leave being very small.

"But," added the solicitor, "your share of the business will be more troublesome. Here is a letter which I solemnly promised our poor friend to deliver into your own hand. She informed me of its main object. It is to request you to undertake the guardianship of her daughter."

"Her daughter?"

"Yes; a nice little girl about nine years old. The only surviving child of a large family. But I thought you knew all the circumstances. You were one of Mrs. Desmond's oldest friends, were you not?"

"I—I—yes; I was a friend of Mrs. Desmond's family many years ago. But Time flies away very fast; and many things fly with him. Was not Mr. Desmond wealthy? I had always understood so."

"My dear sir, Sidney Power Desmond ran through a fine fortune, and sent his paternal

acres to the hammer. I saw a good deal of him, and of her too, at one time, when I was professionally engaged in 'winding-up his affairs,' as he would persist in calling it. A tangled skein, that refused to be wound, I can tell you. Mrs. Desmond was a sweet woman. She had a bad life of it, I'm afraid. Not that he treated her ill. He was fond of her, in his way. But he shook her children's inheritance away out of the dice-box, and then he died, several years later than he ought to have done for the welfare of his family."

The vicar declined Mr. Lovegrove's proffered hospitality, and went back to his dingy hotel chamber to read Clara's letter in solitude.

The letter was short and simple. It appealed to him, on the ground of old friendship, not to decline the trust imposed on him.

"My husband's relatives," thus it ran, "have long been estranged from us. Papa and poor James are dead, and distant cousins, who know little and care less about me or mine, possess my old home. My sister, Lady Tallis, is childless, and she would gladly adopt my little one, and would, I well know, be tender and kind to the orphan. But her unhappy domestic circumstances render this

impossible. Neither, to say truth, is Hilda's husband a man beneath whose roof I should like my daughter to be brought up, even were he willing to permit it. Hilda has her own troubles. I mention these things, not in any spirit of bitterness, but simply that you may understand how utterly friendless my Maud will be when I am gone : for I know her helplessness will appeal strongly to your kind heart."

The letter was common-place and prosaic enough in form and expression : but to Charles Levincourt, sitting there with the sheet of folded paper in his hand, and thinking of the dead woman whom he once loved so well, there was both pathos and eloquence in the sharply written characters. He mused long and sadly on the events of the past years that had so strangely resulted in giving Clara's only surviving child to his care. But whatsoever reflections or regrets these musings awakened in his mind he imparted to no one.

The next day the vicar returned to Shipley, bringing with him a new inmate to the vicarage house. The little orphan was kindly received by the mistress of her new home. Mrs. Levincourt was an Italian by birth. Her mother

had been an Englishwoman, her father a Neapolitan. She had lived abroad all her life until her marriage; was very uneducated, very frivolous, and very beautiful. She had perhaps as small a share of imagination as ever fell to the lot of a human being. The self-confidence arising from this total inability to conceive another person's point of view, to *imagine*, in short, how others might feel or think, was a power which carried her triumphantly over many difficulties. She would reply to an argument or a remonstrance, by some irrelevant platitude which made her husband tingle with shame, but which, to her apprehension, was entirely convincing. On the whole, however, she did her duty well (as far as she understood it) by the little stray lamb brought into her fold. Gentle, it was not in Stella Levincourt's nature to be, but she was kind and attentive to the child's bodily requirements. Mrs. Levincourt's first impression of the little girl, she confided to her husband on the night of his return from London.

"I have put her to bed in a crib in Veronica's room, Charles. She is a quiet docile child, enough. But, oh, caro mio, what a stolid little thing! Just lost her



mother, and as cool and as calm as possible!"

The vicar remembered the child's quivering lip, pale cheek, and anxious yearning look into the strange faces that had surrounded her; and he made answer, "Maud is quiet, but I think not stolid, my dear."

"She is English, English, English to the bone!" retorted Mrs. Levincourt, shrugging her graceful shoulders. "Only figure to yourself if I were to die! Veronica——; but then our darling is so sensitive!"

In Charles Levincourt's mind there arose a vision of a sweet, pale, girlish face, which he had last seen gazing after the coach that carried him away from Delaney Park for ever. And the vision, from some unexplained cause, stung him into the utterance of a sarcastic speech. He had long ago ceased to use sarcasm or irony habitually, in talking with his wife.

"I have no doubt, my dear," said he, "that if Veronica were suffering in mind or body she would take care that every one around her should suffer too."

"*That* she would, poverina!" exclaimed Stella, energetically.

When little Maud Desmond came to live at

the vicarage she was nine years old, and Veronica, the vicar's only child, was eleven. After a short time the two little girls were sent to school at Danecester. Veronica had hitherto refused to go from home, and her refusal had sufficed to prevent her going. Her mother indulged her and worshipped her with a blind devotion, which was repaid (as such devotion often is) by a mingling of fondness, disdain, and tyranny.

But now that Maud was to go to school, Veronica declared that she would accompany her; and she did so. And between their home and the quiet Danecester school the two girls passed several years of their lives.

During the long Midsummer holidays they rambled over the common at Shipley-in-the-Wold, or rode about the country lanes on a rough pony provided for their joint use. In the winter-time they would steal into the kitchen of an evening, and coax old Joanna, the cook, to tell them some of her quaint country legends, or stories of ghosts and runaway marriages, and mysterious warnings, which were supposed to be the exclusive (and one would think unenviable) privileges of sundry ancient county families in whose service Joanna had lived.

Or else they would sit in the gloaming at Mrs. Levincourt's knee and listen to her tales of the brilliant life she had led in Florence, the gaiety, the brightness, the company! The balls at the Pitti and at the noble mansions of the Principessa della Scatola da Salsa and the dowager Countess Civetta, and the Russian lady, whose exact rank was not known, but who was supposed to be the wife of a hospodar. Only she and the hospodar did not agree, and so they lived apart; and they met once a year in Paris, and were admirably polite to each other; and the hospodaress allowed the hospodar several millions of roubles per annum to stay away from her; and she had a necklace of emeralds as big, very nearly, as pigeons' eggs; and she smoked the very finest tobacco extant, and she was altogether a most charming person.

These narratives, and many more, did Maud and Veronica greedily devour. Maud believed them with the same sort of good faith with which she threw herself into Aladdin, or the exquisite fancies of Undine. She was willing to accept the Russian lady, pigeons'-egg emeralds and all.

Such people might exist, did, no doubt, but in a far-off way, altogether out of her sphere.

She no more expected to meet such an individual hung with chains of barbaric splendour, and puffing forth clouds of incense from an amber pipe, than she anticipated the appearance of a geni twenty feet high, when she rubbed her little turquoise ring to keep it bright.

Veronica, however, being two years older, and owning a different turn of mind, looked at matters in a much more practical light.

"And did you go to balls nearly every night, mamma? And did you wear white dresses with short sleeves, and have flowers in your hair? Oh, how beautiful you must have looked!"

"I was never half so handsome as thou, tesoro mio," the fond mother would reply.

"When I'm grown up, I won't stay at Shipley."

That was the burthen of the song, the moral of the story, the issue of it all, for Veronica.

On the whole the family at the vicarage led an isolated life, and the tone of thought and feeling that pervaded their home was very singularly at odds with the general notion of their neighbours as to what was becoming in the household of a clergyman.

In the first place, Mr. Levincourt was en-

tirely devoid of the least tincture of what may, without offence, be called professional parsonism. It is by no means asserted that he was altogether the better for having no such tincture. Men are naturally and legitimately influenced in their outward bearing by the nature of their calling in life. The work which a man does heartily, earnestly, and constantly, will most assuredly communicate a certain bent to his mind, and even a certain aspect to his body. But the work which a man does grudgingly, without thoroughness and faith, will be to him as irksome as an ill-fitting garment, and will, like such a garment, be laid aside and put out of sight altogether whensoever its wearer can get rid of it.

People did not get intimate at the vicarage. The neighbourhood was but sparsely peopled with families of the rank of gentlefolks. Without the command of some vehicle, visiting was out of the question. At first Mrs. Levincourt had gone out rather frequently to formal dinner-parties at great dull country houses, and also to some country houses that were not dull. The hosts sent their carriages for the vicar and his wife, if they lived at a great distance from Shipley. Or a lumbering old

chaise was hired from the Crown at Shipley Magna.

But gradually such intercourse dropped. Mrs. Levincourt was not strong. Mrs. Levincourt did not care for dinner-parties. Mrs. Levincourt had her little girl to attend to. The fact was, that Stella liked society, and she was by no means conscious of the surprise which her sayings and doings were apt to excite among the Daneshire magnates. But her husband was very thoroughly conscious of it. And, as the only kind of visiting they could have, afforded *him* no amusement, their life became more and more secluded.

When the two girls were aged respectively seventeen and fifteen, Mrs. Levincourt died, and then Veronica returned home to "take charge," as they said, of her father's house.

Maud also came back to Shipley vicarage, having "completed her education;" in other words, having learned all that they could teach her at the Danecester school.

For two years, Veronica reigned mistress of her father's household. Perhaps the burthen of the song, Veronica being nineteen, had only so far changed as to run thus: "Now that I *am* grown up, I won't stay at Shipley"?

We shall see.

## CHAPTER IV.

## AN ACCIDENT.

SOME subtle influence—a sight, or sound, or smell—touched the long-drawn links of association in the vicar's mind as he stood at his own door one February afternoon, and made him remember that dreary autumn day on which he had first seen Shipley.

His thought flashed back along the past years, as the electric spark thrills through a long chain of clasping hands.

“Poor Stella!” he said, half aloud.

Mr. Levincourt was apt to spend a good deal of his available store of compassion on himself. But there is no more effectual check to the indulgence of our own failings and weaknesses, than the exaggerated manifestation of the same defect in another. That which in us is only a reasonable and well-

grounded dissatisfaction, becomes mere selfish unjustifiable repining in our neighbours.

So long as his wife lived, therefore, Mr. Levincourt was shamed by her loud and frivolous complainings from expressing one-half the distaste he really felt for his life at Shipley-in-the-Wold, although he had secretly deemed his wife far less entitled to pity than he was, whose qualities of mind and refinement of education enabled him to understand much better what he had lost in being thus buried alive at Shipley.

But Stella Levincourt, born Barletti, slept in St. Gildas's graveyard, and a white tablet glimmering out of the gloomiest corner in the dark little church bore an inscription to her memory. And since her death he had occasionally felt much retrospective sympathy with his wife.

"Poor Stella !" he said again ; and, shutting the door behind him, he walked down the gravel pathway, passed through the iron wicket, crossed the paddock, and proceeded thus through St. Gildas's churchyard towards the village.

It was not a day to loiter in. It had snowed a good deal the previous night, but since ten o'clock that morning a steady thaw had set



in. The roads were deep in mud, whose chill penetrated the stoutest shoe-leather. An ice-cold dew seemed to exude from everything one touched, and the sky spread a lead-coloured canopy from horizon to zenith.

Mr. Levincourt made for the school-house. This was a bare lath-and-plaster building, erected at the cost of the late vicar to serve as a Sunday-school. The present incumbent, while adhering to its founder's first intention, had found an additional use for the white-washed school-room. It served, namely, as a place for the choir of St. Gildas to practise in.

Before Mr. Levincourt's day, the music at divine service in St. Gildas consisted solely of portions of Tate and Brady, bawled, or snuffled out in monotonous dissonance. Mr. Levincourt's refined and critical ear suffered many a shock from his congregation's strenuously uplifted voices. He resolved to amend the singing, and flattered himself that he would find support and encouragement in this undertaking. But folks were as loath to be amended in Shipley as in most other places: and Mr. Levincourt's first attempts to teach them harmony resulted in discord dire.

By degrees he lowered his pretensions. He had begun with high-flown ideas of foreign mass-music adapted to English words. Then,

some of the simpler compositions of our English cathedral writers were attempted. At length he resolved to be satisfied with Martin Luther's Hymn and *Adeste Fideles*, sung in parts. Things began to go better. The younger generation, trained to some knowledge of music, became capable of succeeding in such modest attempts as these. Nor was it, indeed, from the younger generation that the great difficulties had arisen.

Farmer Meggitt, and Farmer Sack, and other middle-aged farmers and graziers, could not be got to understand that it behoved them to be passive listeners to the music during service.

"What do ye mean, then, by 'Let us sing to the praise——'? Let *us*," Farmer Meggitt said *oos*, "sing! Not 'let the little lads and wenches in the organ-loft sing to the praise'! Parson Levincourt's on a wrong tack altogether. And as to his new-fangled tunes—why they're Popish: that's what they are: and I don't care who hears me say so!"

The implied slight to Farmer Meggitt's vocal abilities made him very Protestant indeed. And the charge of Popery against Mr. Levincourt was supposed to be a very colourable and serious one, seeing that he had a foreign wife.

However, Time went on in his task of turning "new-fangled" things into old-fangled. And the congregation of St. Gildas had long grown very proud of their singing. Miss Desmond had a class of village children to whom she taught some of the mysteries contained in the queer black-headed hieroglyphics on the musical staff; and the choir met to practise every Saturday evening. And on this one special Saturday afternoon in February, Mr. Levincourt, having floundered through the thick mud of the lane, arrived at the school-house door, turned the handle, and walked in, when the practising was just over.

The children were making ready to troop out. Some of the little boys, uneasy under the stern glance of Mr. Mugworthy, the parish clerk, still sat on the wooden benches, from which their corduroy-clad legs dangled and swung, as unrestingly as the pendulum of the big white-faced clock that ticked away the hours above the door.

At a little deal-cased harmonium sat Herbert Snowe, the son of a rich Danecester banker. This young gentleman had been educated in Germany, where he had caught a taste for music. His dilettanteism was strong enough to induce him to make the journey

from Danecester nearly every week, in order to supply, at the Saturday rehearsals, the place of the professional organist, who was only engaged to come to Shipley for the Sunday services.

Not far from him, stood Mr. Plew, the village doctor, talking to the vicar's daughter. Mr. Plew had the meekest and weakest of high tenor voices, and gave the choir the benefit of his assistance whenever his professional avocations would permit him to do so.

Then, there were Kitty and Cissy Meggitt, with their governess, Miss Turtle. Mrs. Meggitt was of an aspiring nature, and had prevailed on her husband to engage a "real lady" to teach her girls manners. Farmer Meggitt paid the "real lady" five-and-twenty pounds per annum, and he thought in his heart that it was an exorbitantly high price for the article.

Then, there were Captain and Mrs. Sheardown, of Lowater House. They did not sing; but they had come to fetch their son, Master Bobby Sheardown, who sat on a high school-bench among the "trebles."

Lastly, there was Maud Desmond.

"Good evening," said the vicar, walking into the room.

Immediately there was a shuffling and scraping of feet. Every boy slid down from his bench, and drew each one a hobnailed boot noisily over the bare floor in homage, raising at the same time a bunch of sunburnt knuckles to his forehead. The little girls ducked down convulsively, the smaller ones assisting themselves to rise again with an odd struggling movement of the elbow. This was the ceremony of salutation to a superior among the rustic youth of Shipley.

"How have you been getting on, Herbert?" said Mr. Levincourt. "How do you do, Mrs. Sheardown? Captain, when I saw that the West Daneshire were to meet at Hammick, I scarcely expected to have the pleasure of seeing you this evening!"

"No; I didn't hunt to-day," answered the captain.

Captain Sheardown was a broad-shouldered man of some five-and-fifty years of age. His bluff face was fringed with white whiskers. His eyes were surrounded by a network of fine lines, that looked as though they had been graven on the firm skin by an etching-needle, and he generally stood with his legs somewhat wide apart, as one who is balancing himself on an unsteady surface.

The gentlemen gathered together into a knot by themselves while they waited for the ladies to put on their warm shawls and cloaks.

"I wonder what sort of a run they had with the West Daneshire?" said Herbert Snowe.

"I heard, sir, as there were a accident on the field," said Mr. Mugworthy, who had edged himself near to the group of gentlemen.

"An accident!" repeated the vicar. "What was it? Nothing serious, I trust?"

"No, sir; from what I can reap out of the rumour of the boy, Sack, it warn't a very serious accident. Jemmy Sack, he seen it, sir. It happened close up by his father's farm."

"Sack's farm, eh?" said Captain Sheardown. "Why that's at Haymoor!"

"Well, sir, it is," rejoined Mr. Mugworthy, after a moment's pause, as though he had been casting about in his mind for some reasonable means of contradicting the statement, but, finding none, was resolved to be candid, and make a clean breast of it. "It is, sir, at Haymoor, is Sack's farm. I can't say no otherways"

"Whew!" whistled the captain. "Who'd

have thought of a fox out of the Hammick cover, making for Haymoor! With the wind as it is, too—and as it has been all day.”

“Why shouldn’t he?” asked Herbert Snowe, whose foreign education had left him lamentably ignorant on certain matters of which Captain Sheardown conceived that an English gentleman ought to know a good deal.

“Why shouldn’t he?” echoed the captain, screwing up his eyes and mouth into an expression of comical vexation, and thereby deepening the finely-graven lines before mentioned. “Why shouldn’t he? Bless my soul, Herbert! Because a fox going from Hammick to Haymoor to-day, must have run straight up wind the whole time! That’s why. Why shouldn’t he? Tshah!”

“A dog-fox, sir,” put in Mugworthy, solemnly, “*will* sometimes run up wind at this time of year when he’s a-going home, sir.”

“Well, well,” said the vicar, with the slightest possible air of contempt for the whole subject: “we will suppose that this was a Haymoor fox, who had been visiting his relations at Hammick. But about the accident, Mugworthy?”

“Jemmy Sack, he seen it, sir. Come up here, Jemmy, and tell his reverence about the

gentleman that was precipitated off of his horse alongside of the five-acre field."

Jemmy Sack, a lank lad of thirteen, came and stood before the vicar, and with many writhings, and in agonies of bashfulness, delivered himself of his story.

The story simply amounted to his having seen a gentleman flung from his horse with a good deal of violence. The others had ridden on, either not seeing or not heeding. After a while the gentleman's servant had galloped up to his assistance. The gentleman had risen and mounted again: but not the same horse. He took the beast that his servant had been riding, and sent the groom away with the animal that had thrown him. The gentleman had then ridden after the rest of the hunt towards Upper Haymoor.

"Ah! Well, there was not much harm done, I'm happy to find. If the gentleman went on following the hounds, he could not have been much hurt," said the vicar. "You didn't know the gentleman by sight, Jemmy, did you?"

Jemmy did not know the gentleman's name; but he knowed that he was a-staying at the Crown Inn, Shipley Magna, and that he had four horses in the stables there, and



that the people said as he was a friend of Lord George Segrave's, him as had taken Hammick Lodge for the hunting season. And Jemmy, becoming accustomed to the sound of his own voice addressing gentlefolks, and finding himself listened to, began to grow loquacious, and to volunteer his opinion that the gentleman had a-got a oogly spill, for he turned welly green, and seemed all queer in his head like. But he was a good plucked 'un, for he would go on a-horseback again, and he (Jemmy) had run nigh enough to hear him a-cussin' and a-swearin' at the groom like foon.

In fact so loquacious and graphic in his narrative did Jemmy become, that Mugworthy peremptorily ordered him to hold his tongue, and begone, with the other lads. The boys shuffled out, glad to be released, and were presently heard whooping down the lane after the manner of their kind.

## CHAPTER V.

## AN INVOLUNTARY GUEST.

By this time Mrs. Sheardown had enveloped herself and Bobby in waterproof wrappings. Maud Desmond was waiting, warmly protected by a thick shawl, at the vicar's elbow. Herbert Snowe shut and locked the harmonium. Every one was preparing to depart.

"Veronica!" called the vicar.

Miss Levincourt was still conversing with Mr. Plew.

"Veronica!" repeated her father, impatiently, "are you not coming?"

She turned round at the summons, giving her hand in a farewell grasp to the doctor as she did so.

She was very handsome.

The first thing that struck you on looking at her face, was its vivid colouring. Her skin

was of a clear, pale brown tint; and on each smooth cheek there glowed a rich blush like the heart of a June rose. She had large, dark eyes, fringed round with thick lashes, and surmounted by semicircular eyebrows, black as ebony. Her hair was also black, shining, and very abundant. It was disposed in elaborate coils and plaits, which displayed its luxuriance to the full, and was brought down low on the forehead in crisp waves. Her lips were very red, and her teeth very white. There were defects in the form of her face. But the brilliant eyes, glancing under their arched brows, so attracted attention to themselves, that few observers were dispassionately critical enough to observe that the lower part of the face overbalanced the upper; that the nose was insignificant; the mouth so full as to be almost coarse; and the cheeks and chin so rounded as to threaten to lose all comeliness of outline, and to become heavy in middle life. Now, however, at nineteen years of age, Veronica Levincourt was a very beautiful creature. But there was something in her face which was not so easily analysed by a casual observer as the form and colour of it. There was a dissonance in it somewhere. Most women perceived this. Many men did so also.

But they perceived it as a person with a good ear, but ignorant of harmony, perceives a false note in a chord. Something jars : what, he knows not. The skilled musician comes and puts his finger on the dissonant note.

When Veronica laughed, her whole countenance grew harmonious at once. And herein lay the key to the puzzle.

The habitual expression of her face in repose seemed to contradict the brilliant glow of youth and health which made her so strikingly beautiful. The rich gipsy colour, the ripe red lips, the sparkling eyes, the gleaming teeth, seemed made to tell of light-hearted, abounding, girlish happiness. But the expression of Veronica's face, when she let it fall into its habitual lines, was wistful, sad, sometimes almost sullen.

For the rest, her figure was slight and straight, and she carried herself with an erect and yet easy grace.

"Coming, papa," said she, carelessly. And then she gathered about her shoulders a scarlet cloak with a hood to it.

"You should have had your shepherd's plaid, Veronica," said her father. "That red thing is not nearly warm enough for such an evening as this."

“O, it is *so* becoming to Miss Levincourt,” said little Miss Turtle, the governess. She and her pupils had been watching Veronica unwinkingly all the afternoon, as their custom was.

The choir of St. Gildas dispersed. The Sheardowns drove away in their little pony-carriage, carrying with them Herbert Snowe, who usually stayed with them on Saturday evenings. Miss Turtle took her pupils, one on each arm, and her grey cloak and shabby hat with its black feather disappeared down the lane. The vicar, with his ward and his daughter, walked in the opposite direction towards their home.

The nearest way to the vicarage house was across St. Gildas's churchyard. But the melted snow lay in death-cold pools between the swelling grave-mounds, and although the lanes afforded no good walking in the present state of the weather, they were yet rather better than the way by the churchyard.

Mention has been made of a by-road through the village from Shipley Magna which skirted the garden wall of the vicarage. Mr. Levincourt and the two girls had not gone many paces down this by-road, when they perceived through the fast-gathering dusk a figure, which had evidently been on

the watch for them, start and run towards them very swiftly.

"I do believe it is Jemmy Sack!" exclaimed Maud Desmond.

Jemmy Sack it was, who presently came to a sudden stop in front of the vicar, and began a breathless and incoherent speech.

"Dunnot ye be frightened, please sir, Joe Dowsett says. They ha'n't a took him into the house, please sir. And it's the same un as I seed tumble off afore. On'y this here time he's in a reg'lar swoond like. But Joe Dowsett says as ye bain't to be frightened, nor yet the young ladies nayther, please sir."

Long before the combined cross-examination of the vicar and the young ladies had succeeded in eliciting any explicit statement from Jemmy, they arrived at the garden door, and then the matter to a certain extent explained itself.

A man in a scarlet hunting coat thickly crusted with mud lay on his back in the road beneath the garden wall, and close by a heap of flint stones piled up for the use of the road-menders. On to these he had apparently been flung, for his face was cut, and a thin stream of blood trickled slowly down his forehead.

The prostrate man was totally insensible.

His head was supported on the knee of Joe Dowsett, the vicar's gardener, groom, and general factotum, who was endeavouring to pour some brandy down his throat. A carter, in a smock-frock, held a handsome horse by the bridle. Three of the village boys who had been practising in the school-room stood at a little distance looking on, and two frightened women-servants, with their aprons huddled round their shivering shoulders, peeped nervously from the garden door, and plied Joe Dowsett with shrill questions, of which he took no notice whatever.

A clamour of voices arose as soon as the vicar was perceived: but a few words will suffice to put the reader in possession of the facts of the case. The fallen man was the same gentleman whom Jemmy had seen thrown earlier in the day. The day's sport had terminated at a considerable distance from Shipley Magna. The gentleman was a stranger, had probably missed his way, and gone by roundabout roads. He had evidently at last been making for Shipley Magna, having struck into Bassett's-lane, as the by-road was called. His horse and he were both tired out, and he had begun to feel the effects of his first fall more severely than he had felt them in the

heat of the chase and at the beginning of the day. The carter had perceived the gentleman's horse stumble, and at the same instant the boys returning from the school-house had appeared shouting and whooping at the end of the lane. In a moment the gentleman had been pitched heavily off his horse, and had fallen on the heap of flint stones. The carter couldn't say for sure, but he believed that the horse stumbled before the lads startled him. And now what was to be done? This question was put by Joe Dowsett, looking up at his master with the brandy bottle in his hand.

The first thing to be done was to send for a doctor. Mr. Plew would probably not have reached his own home yet. Jemmy Sack was despatched to fetch him, and set off running at a famous rate, throwing out his long legs, and followed by the other boys, to all of whom the occasion seemed to be one of intense and concentrated ecstasy.

But, pending Mr. Plew's arrival, the swooning man could not lie there, with the night falling fast, and a bitter wind blowing from the marshes, that was fit, Joe Dowsett said, to freeze the very marrow in your bones.

There was no other house at hand. The vicarage was a lonely, isolated dwelling. Joe



Dowsett and the carter, with a little assistance from Mr. Levincourt, carried the stranger into the house. The women hurried to take, from an old oaken press, blankets and coverlets for the spare bed. A fire was lighted in the guest's chamber—a room on the ground floor, looking towards the garden. For that night at least, the injured man must remain at the vicarage.

Mr. Levincourt was very uneasy, and asked Joe over and over again if he thought it was serious? To which queries Joe invariably replied that it might be or it mightn't, but that for his part he didn't think 't wouldn't be much: an oracular utterance in which his master seemed to find some comfort. Veronica sat at the window, straining eye and ear to catch the first signal of the doctor's coming.

"He's quite old, this poor man, isn't he, papa?" said she, with her face pressed against the glass.

"Old? No. What do you call 'quite old'? It is difficult to judge under the circumstances, but I should say he can't be more than fifty."

"Ah! well—that's what I meant. Here is Mr. Plew at last! I hear his step on the gravel, although I can't see him yet."

Mr. Plew's opinion was not very reassuring. If the patient were not better by to-morrow, he should fear that he could not safely be moved for a day or two. Meanwhile Mr. Plew would like Dr. Gunnery of Danecester to be called in, in consultation.

When Dr. Gunnery arrived on the following afternoon, he shook his head very gravely, and said that he had no hope of the patient being able to leave his bed for some weeks. Even if—and here Dr. Gunnery lowered his voice, and reversed the movement of his head, nodding it up and down instead of shaking it from side to side—even *if* he pulled through at all!

## CHAPTER VI.

## SUSPENSE.

THE vicar's first thought on hearing Dr. Gunnery's opinion, was that it behoved him (the vicar) to communicate with the family of the stranger whom Fate had thrown—literally thrown—into the midst of the quiet household at the vicarage. As it was, they could hardly have known less about him, had he dropped among them from the moon, instead of from the back of a startled horse.

But for many hours the injured man was incapable of communicating with his host. Fever set in. He became delirious at intervals. And on no account must he be disturbed or annoyed by questions. Dr. Gunnery confirmed Mr. Plew's first statement, that no irreparable injury had been done to the stranger by his fall.

"But," said he, "he is a bad subject. If we had a young constitution, or even a sound

constitution for his years, to deal with, the whole affair would be a mere trifle. But in this case it is very different."

"Very different, indeed," assented Mr. Plew.

"No stamina," continued the Danecester physician. "The whole machine is in a worn-out condition—constitution gone to the deuce."

"To the——ahem! quite so!" assented Mr. Plew again.

"Then, Dr. Gunnery," said Mr. Levincourt, nervously, "do you mean to say that he is in danger? Dear me, this is dreadful! Really dreadful!"

But to so direct a question Dr. Gunnery could, or would, give no direct reply. He merely repeated that in his opinion Mr. Levincourt ought to lose no time in communicating with the sick man's family. And then, saying that he would return the day after tomorrow, and that meanwhile the patient could not possibly be in better hands than those of Mr. Plew, the great Danecester doctor drove away.

Beyond the facts that had come under his own eyes, the vicar knew but two circumstances regarding his involuntary guest. The

first circumstance was, that he had been staying at the Crown, in Shipley Magna; the second was, that Lord George Segrave was said to be a friend of his.

Mr. Levincourt despatched a note to Lord George, and ordered Joe Dowsett (to whom the note was entrusted) to ride on from Hammick Lodge to Shipley Magna, and tell the people at the Crown what had happened.

From Hammick Lodge, Joe Dowsett brought back a very polite note.

It appeared that the acquaintance between Lord George Segrave and the stranger was of the slightest possible kind. They had met in Rome one season, and had hunted side by side on the Campagna. Lord George knew nothing whatever of the gentleman's family. His name was Gale, Sir John Gale. Lord George was deeply distressed that the vicar of Shipley and his family should be so seriously inconvenienced by this accident. At the same time he could hardly regret, on Sir John Gale's account, that the latter should have fallen into such hands. Lord George would do himself the honour of calling at Shipley vicarage, and meanwhile he begged to know if there were any way in which he could be of service, either to Mr. Levincourt or to the invalid, under these painful circumstances.

This note, although extremely civil, left matters pretty much as they had been before. But from the Crown Inn, Joe Dowsett brought back something more tangible and unexpected.

He brought back, that is say, Sir John Gale's foreign servant, who announced himself as "Paul," and who immediately took upon himself all the duties of waiting on the sick man.

"If you will permit, sir," said Paul, in very good English, "I will have a mattress laid by the side of my master's bed for a few nights. When Sir John gets better, and needs not to have me all night, I shall find to sleep at the village. There is a small cabaret there, as I have informed myself."

The arrival of this man, which was at first looked upon with dismay by the inmates of the vicarage, proved before long to be an inestimable comfort and relief.

In the first place, he eased the vicar's mind by taking upon himself the responsibility of communicating with Sir John's friends. Or rather he proved that no such responsibility existed. Sir John had, Paul declared, no relatives. He had neither wife nor child, brother nor sister, uncle nor cousin. He had lived a great deal abroad. Paul had not been

with Sir John in England, before this winter. He would write to Sir John's agent and man of business. That was all that would be necessary.

Mr. Levincourt, never unwilling to shift responsibility on to the shoulders of others, told Paul that he must do as he thought best. There was something in the grave, steady aspect of the little man that inspired confidence. Then Paul took upon himself the whole business of the sick room. He waited by day, and watched by night. He administered the medicines. He reported progress to the doctors, with an intelligence and accuracy which won those gentlemen's good opinion very soon. He relieved the vicar's servants of all trouble as regarded Sir John Gale. He even went into the kitchen, and, with a certain grave tact which characterised him, won over old Joanna to allow him to prepare sundry articles of invalid diet for his master. He was always at hand when wanted, and yet entirely unobtrusive. He was never tired, never sleepy, never sulky, never indiscreet.

In a word, before many days of his sojourn at the vicarage had passed over, the whole household began to wonder how they had managed to get through the few hours that

had intervened between the accident, and the arrival of the admirable Paul.

He very soon contrived to let it be understood that money expenses would not, at all events, be added to the burthen thrown on the vicar's family by his master's accident and illness. Sir John was rich : very rich. No expense need be spared. If, even, it were deemed necessary to send to London for additional medical assistance, they need not hesitate to do so. This, however, did not appear to be desirable. And as soon as Sir John was enabled to understand his own condition, he expressed himself entirely satisfied with the skill and care of the doctors who were attending him.

Lord George Segrave fulfilled his promise of calling. Lord George was a bachelor. He was a great sportsman, and some folks said that he was too fond of other pursuits which persons holding strict views could not approve. Lord George was well known on the turf; and in his youthful days had been a patron of the Prize Ring. Without belonging to the category of those whose lives were openly scandalous, he yet was a man whose acquaintance could by no means be taken to be a certificate of good character.



Retired as was Mr. Levincourt's life at Shipley-in-the-Wold, he yet knew this much of the present occupant of Hammick Lodge, and the knowledge had not served to make Sir John Gale's enforced presence beneath his own roof the more agreeable to him.

But Lord George Segrave soon made it apparent that his acquaintance with Sir John was really and truly no closer than he had stated in his note. It need scarcely be said that Lord George had no idea what a signal service he was rendering to the invalid in his host's opinion, by disclaiming anything like intimacy with the former.

Lord George was rather good-natured, and extremely selfish, and he desired that it should be at once clearly understood that, while he was willing to send his servants scouring the country on any errand for Sir John that the vicar might suggest, he (Lord George) by no means intended to put himself to the personal inconvenience of making frequent visits of inquiry at the vicarage.

"Pray, command me, Mr. Levincourt," he said, as he took his leave, "in any way. I quite feel what an uncommon bore this business must be for you. Though, as I said before, Gale may think himself in luck that he

didn't get spilt on any other heap of flint stones than the one at your door. I'm sure I hope he'll pull through, and all that sort of thing. You know I had only just a kind of bowing acquaintance with him in Rome. And then he hailed me on the hunting-field at Stubbs's Corner the other day, you know, and—and that sort of thing. Hammick Lodge is twelve miles from Shipley as the crow flies, you know, and—and so I'm afraid I shan't be able to look him up myself very often, you know. But I hope you will do me the favour to command me if there's anything in the world my fellows can do, or—or that sort of thing."

And then Lord George Segrave departed, feeling that he had done all that could reasonably be expected of him.

Dr. Gunnery came again and again. And Mr. Plew was unremitting in his attentions. The house, always quiet, was now hushed into stillness. The piano remained closed. Joe Dowsett ceased to whistle as he worked in the garden. The servants stole up to bed past the door of the guest-room, making every board of the staircase creak under their elaborately cautious footfall. Paul's noiseless step glided through the passages, and he came on you like a ghost.

Riot and merriment are contagious. So are silence and the hush of suspense. But though the vicarage was stiller than it was wont to be, it was less dull. All the household was conscious of a suppressed excitement, which was merely stirring, and did not reach to pain. Every day, every hour of the day, presented a question whose answer was deferred—Will he live or die? And on the answer to this question hung no agonised human heart—none, at least, within that house.

Was there anywhere a breast fluttered by hopes, oppressed by fears, for the sick man who lay feverish and uneasy on the stranger's bed in Shipley vicarage?

No letters came for him. No friends inquired.

He was discussed in the vicarage kitchen, and in other kitchens in the neighbourhood. He was discussed in the village ale-house, in the farm-houses, in the tap-room and the stables of the Crown at Shipley Magna. He was spoken of, once or twice, at the different meets of the West Daneshire hunt. Lord George Segrave mentioned that he believed Gale was going on all right, you know, and that sort of thing. That was a niceish nag of his, not the one he had been riding when he

was thrown, you know ; no, that little chesnut, Lord George wouldn't mind having him. He wondered what the figure would be. If Gale's horses were still at the Crown, he had a good mind to go over and have another look at the chesnut, and to ask Gale's groom whether he thought his master would sell him. He supposed that Gale had had enough of hunting in England. He was dooced sorry for him, you know, and that sort of thing, but what the — could he expect? With that seat, he (Lord George) only wondered how Gale had been able to stick on his saddle five minutes ! And most of the field wondered too. For it has been observed that of all the trials to which human candour, modesty, and magnanimity are ordinarily apt to be subjected, the trial of comparing your own riding with another man's is the one that most frequently developes mortal frailty.

There was probably not a man who habitually hunted with the West Daneshire, who did not secretly nourish the conviction that his own seat on horseback was admirable, and that the majority of his friends and acquaintances rode like tailors !

Little it mattered to Sir John Gale what was said of him in parlour, kitchen, stable, or

hunting-field. Little, perhaps, would it ever matter to him more. For although, as Dr. Gunnery had said, the absolute injuries resulting from the accident were trifling, and to a young and vigorous constitution would have been matters of small importance, yet in this case there seemed to be no elasticity, or power of rebound in the sick man's frame. A low fever took hold of him : a dreadful insidious fever, that might be figured as a weird phantom invisible to the eyes of men, but with two bony cruel hands, whose touch was terrible. Of these hands, one was cold as ice ; the other burning, like the heart of a furnace. Alternately the viewless fingers stroked the sick man's body, drawing long shuddering thrills through every limb ; or clutched him with a lingering gripe that made his very heart sick. Now, he was consumed with scorching heat ; anon, he shivered to the marrow of his bones.

Mr. Plew did not trouble his brain—or perhaps it were better to say his brain was not troubled, seeing that such fancies come to a man, or stay away from him, without any conscious exercise of his will—with any fantastic embodiment of a Fever Phantom. But he reported day after day, that Sir John was

in a nasty low way—a *ve-ry na-asty*, low way—and that he couldn't get him to rally.

"Do you think he is troubled in his mind?" asked Mr. Levincourt. "Is his heart ill at ease? He is perfectly conscious now; and, I think, clear-headed enough to give orders. And yet Paul tells me that his master has entirely approved what has been done, and what has been left undone. He desires to see no one; has received no letters—except, as Paul tells me, one from his agent sent to the Post Office at Shipley Magna—and, in short, appears to be singularly isolated in the world, for a man of his wealth and position. I should fear his life has not been a very happy one."

"Well," said Mr. Plew, musingly, "I don't know, of course. But—but he doesn't seem to me to be at all that sort of man."

Mr. Plew's statement was vague enough: and the vicar did not care to be at the pains of probing the little surgeon's meaning. Yet the latter had a meaning, although he would have found it difficult to put it into clear words.

His meaning was this: that from his observation of Sir John Gale, he had, half instinctively, drawn the conclusion that his rich

patient was not a man to allow sentimental troubles to prey on him.

Wounded love, tender regrets, affectionate yearnings after a lost friendship, or a longing for softer tendance and closer companionship than could be had from servants and strangers, did not seem to Mr. Plew likely to enter into the category of drawbacks to Sir John's recovery.

Material comforts, nay luxuries, he did not lack. As to sentiment—Mr. Plew of course had encountered ailments arising from purely spiritual causes. Very troublesome ailments they were, and very ineffacious proved the power of physic to cure them. He remembered a saying of an old clergyman who had been a famous preacher in the days when Benjamin Plew was walking the hospitals in London. The saying was to the effect that the bodily health of half the world would be marvellously improved, if a mechanical cunningly contrived piece of granite could be substituted for a heart of flesh in the human breast. "We might defy the doctors then," said this old clergyman, "and——life would not be worth having!" But of Sir John Gale neither Mr. Plew nor the reader as yet knows enough to enable him to judge whether the baronet's heart be of flesh or of stone.

A fortnight passed : three weeks : a month had nearly dragged itself away since the accident, when the doctors pronounced that Sir John was somewhat stronger.

The phantom hands, the hand of fire and the hand of ice, slowly relinquished their prey. By degrees the intervals between their alternate touches grew wider. At last they ceased. Danger was over ; and from the beginning of March, the invalid began slowly, but surely, to mend.



## CHAPTER VII.

MR. FLEW.

AT Shipley-in-the-Wold, people dined at two o'clock and took tea at six or seven. "Tea-time" was the vicar's favourite hour of the twenty-four, especially in the winter season. The work of the day was over. The fire blazed up companionably, and filled the pauses of conversation with light and warmth. And if a forlorn wind went moaning without upon the "glooming flats," its voice only heightened, by imagined contrast, the comforts of the ingle nook.

The family sitting-room—named, in Dane-shire parlance, the parlour—was no exception to the assertion that Shipley vicarage was an ugly house. Yet even here the magic of the leaping flame and glowing coals worked wonders. It sent flickering shadows to play over the bare ceiling ; it made the glass panes

of a tall book-case sparkle with flashing rubies ; it found out every gleam of gilding on the tarnished bindings of the well-worn books ; it mellowed the hue of the faded crimson window-curtains, subdued the staring pattern of the wall-paper, and made the old-fashioned chintz covering on the furniture seem rich and harmonious as an Indian carpet.

"Give me another cup of tea, Veronica," said the vicar, sitting in the parlour on a drear March evening.

His daughter and his ward were both with him. On each of the three faces there was, for once, a look of cheerfulness. That morning their guest had been pronounced out of danger. The shadow which had darkened the house was passing away.

"Give me another cup of tea," said the vicar once more, rubbing his hands together. And then he pursued the discourse which his demand had interrupted. "Yes ; and I assure you I am very much pleased with Sir John altogether. Nothing could be better chosen than his manner of expressing himself."

"What did he say, papa ?"

"Oh, well ! I cannot recollect word for word. Thanks, of course, and gratitude, and

—and so on. But not over-done. Very earnest and gentlemanlike. He appears to be a man of the world, yet not exactly worldly. He has, in short, I should say, a great deal of *savoir vivre*."

"*Savoir vivre*!" repeated Maud, musingly. "That would be an art to learn; how to live!"

"The quintessence of all arts, Maudie."

"Yes; and it would include—would it not?—how to die; if one did but consider aright."

"Maud!" cried Veronica, with a little shudder, "I do beg of you not to be solemn. Don't talk of such things. It makes me cold. You are worse than a north-east wind blowing over the snow-drifts."

Veronica inherited from her mother a more than childish horror of death. The slightest allusion to it sufficed to cloud her bright face and make her irritable

"Well," answered Maud, quietly. "Sir John Gale is not going to die just yet, they say, so there is no need to be solemn, as you call it. It is to be hoped he will give up hunting, or learn to get a better seat on horseback. Joe Dowsett says that that hunter of his is as gentle as a lamb, and has such a

mouth that a baby might ride him. And yet Sir John could not contrive to stick on his back."

"That's not quite fair, Maud," observed the vicar. "When Sir John was thrown opposite the garden gate, he was in a half-fainting condition, you must remember. But it was not then that the mischief was done. It was an ugly fall he got earlier in the day from a fresh, hot-tempered beast. He changed horses afterwards, and persisted in continuing to 'assault the chase,' as Mugworthy says. So I do not think we are justified in concluding anything to the disadvantage of his horsemanship."

"But don't you know, papa," Veronica put in, "that Joe has inoculated Maud with the true Daneshire notion that only Daneshire folks born and bred, can ride?"

Maud smiled and shook her head.

"Sir John charged me," said the vicar, "with 'a thousand heartfelt thanks to my amiable daughters.'"

"Thanks?" exclaimed Veronica. "Truly, we have done nothing for him. Paul takes care that his master shall lack no service. So then, Sir John thinks that Maud is your daughter as well as I?"

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"I suppose so. It matters nothing. In a short time he will go away, and in a—perhaps—rather longer time, will have forgotten all about us; so that it was very unnecessary to trouble him with family details."

"If he forgets all about *you*, it will be very ungrateful, Uncle Charles," said Maud.

From the earliest days of her coming to the vicarage, Maud Desmond had been used to call Mr. Levincourt and his wife "uncle" and "aunt;" although she was, of course, aware that no relationship really existed between them and herself.

"Ungrateful? Well I don't know. It would scarcely have been practicable to leave him outside the garden gate all night. Do you know any one who would have shut the door and gone in quietly to bed under the circumstances?"

"Forget us!" cried Veronica, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders; "no doubt he will forget us! Who that once turned his back on Shipley would care ever to think of it again?"

"I would," replied Maud, very quietly.

"Would you? I am not sure of that. But at all events the cases are widely different. Sir John is wealthy. He can travel. He

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has seen many countries, Paul says : France, Italy, the East. He can go where he pleases : can enjoy society. O, Shipley-in-the-Wold must be a mere little ugly blot on *his* map of the world !”

The vicar sighed, uncrossed his legs, and stretched them out straight before him, so as to bring his feet nearer to the fire.

“What made him come to the little ugly blot, then, when he had all the sunny places to choose from ?” demanded Maud, indignantly.

“He came for the hunting, I suppose.”

“Very well, then ; you see there was something in Shipley that he couldn’t get in his France, and his Italy, and his East !”

Veronica burst out laughing. She seated herself on the rug at Maud’s feet, and leaning back looked up into her face.

“What a child you are, Maudie !” she exclaimed. *His* France and *his* East ! Yes : I suppose rich people find good things everywhere—even in Shipley.”

“And they get pitched off their horses, and are bruised and cut, and burnt by fever, and prostrated by weakness, in spite of their riches,” observed Maud, philosophically.

“Children,” said the vicar, suddenly, “do

you want to go to Lowater on the nineteenth?"

"Of course we do, papa. What is it? Have you had an invitation?"

Veronica's eyes sparkled, and her rosy lips smiled, and she clapped her slender hands together joyously. Maud, too, looked eager and interested.

"Yes," answered Mr. Levincourt; "I have had an invitation for us all to dine with the Sheardowns on the nineteenth. It is their wedding-day."

"How exquisite!" cried Veronica, seizing one of Maud's hands that rested on her shoulder, and squeezing it hard. "A dinner party! A well in the desert! A tuft of palm-trees in a barren land!"

"I suppose we must go," said the vicar, plaintively.

"I 'suppose we must,' indeed. Why, papa, you know you like the idea of it as much as we do."

"I am always charmed to meet Mrs. Sheardown and the captain."

"No doubt of it," cried Veronica, now in a full glow of excitement. "We know that you are Mistress Nelly Sheardown's most devoted cavalier. But it isn't only that, papa

mio. You like the idea of a change, a break in the monotony, a peep at something beyond Shipley. You would like to go, if it were even to dine at Haymoor with old Lady Alicia. And quite right too, say I."

The vicar made an attempt to assert his prerogative of victimhood, but in vain. The varying thermometer of Veronica's spirits had risen to fever heat, and she rattled on volubly, speculating as to who there would be at Lowater; whether Mrs. Sheardown would contrive to give them a dance in the evening; what she should wear (exhaustless theme), and so forth.

At length the stream of words slackened, and then ceased. The rival merits of scarlet and amber ribbons demanded an absorbed and silent consideration.

"Don't you think, Uncle Charles," said Maud, "that Mrs. Sheardown is the sweetest woman you ever saw?"

"She is charming, in truth; charming and excellent; and, moreover, possesses a mind of a very superior calibre."

"Bravo, Uncle Charles! And then she is—in my eyes, at least—so pretty. That quality must not be omitted in the catalogue of her perfections."



"I am not quite sure on the point, Maudie. *Is* she very pretty? I don't think that any man would ever have fallen in love with Mrs. Sheardown for her beauty."

"Perhaps not. And if so, all the better. Sure I am that any who once loved her would never cease to think her beautiful."

Veronica looked up. "All true," she said. "I agree with your eulogium. And observe that it is pure magnanimity which prompts me to do so. For, sweet Mistress Nelly does not like me one bit."

"O Veronica!"

"O Maud! It is so. I have a sixth sense, which never deceives me in these matters. I *know* that to Mrs. Sheardown I am not *simpatica*."

"*Simpatica*! Nonsense. Whenever you use an Italian word where an English one would serve, I know that you are saying something that won't bear daylight. Why should not Mrs. Sheardown like you?"

Veronica clasped her hands behind her head, and rested both head and arms on Maud's knee. Then, with her eyes cast contemplatively upward, "Because I am not good," said she.

The vicar's brows contracted into an uneasy

pucker as he looked down on his daughter's beautiful face.

"Veronica," he said, almost sternly, "I wish you would not say such things."

"Very well, papa; I won't."

"Still more, I wish that you would not think such thoughts."

"Ah, questo poi——"

"If you please, sir," said Catherine, the maid, putting her rosy face into the room, "here is Mr. Plew."

Mr. Plew was hospitably invited to enter. The surgeon of Shipley was a small man, with a fringe of straight light hair round a bald crown. His eyes were of a weak blue tint; his skin usually pale yellow. On the present occasion, however, it burnt with a fiery red, in consequence of the change from the piercing outer air to the temperature of the vicar's well-warmed and well-lighted parlour. His eyes watered, and his frost-inflamed nose glowed like a hot coal, above the white woollen comforter that enveloped his throat.

"I fear I am intruding at an unseasonable hour," said Mr. Plew, speaking with a strong provincial accent and a gentle, deprecating manner.

"By no means. Pray come in. It is our  
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idle hour, you know. Veronica, ring for a clean cup, and give Mr. Plew some tea," said the vicar.

"Not any, thank you. Pray don't move, Miss Levincourt. I have just left our patient's room. I could not resist coming to congratulate you on the favourable verdict that Dr. Gunnery pronounced this morning. Paul told me. I was unable to be here earlier in the day. But, from my own observation of Sir John's condition this evening, I am quite able to endorse what Dr. Gunnery said. Danger is over for the present."

Mr. Plew spoke in a rather hesitating, shy way. And, although he seemingly tried to control his wandering glances, he could not help turning his eyes at every minute towards the hearth, where Miss Levincourt still remained in her nonchalant attitude on the rug.

"Veronica, get up," whispered Maud.

"Why? I am very comfortable. Mr. Plew is an old friend. We don't treat him with ceremony; do we, Mr. Plew?" said Veronica, aloud.

"O dear, Miss Levincourt, I trust not. I beg—that is—I hope you would not think of disturbing yourself on my account."

"Then you must seek another cushion," said Maud, bluntly. "I am weary of your weight. You are as well able to support yourself, as I am to support you."

With that, Miss Desmond rose, crossed the room, and took a chair beside the vicar. Mr. Plew's face uttered a mute and disapproving commentary on the action.

Veronica caught his look, and instantly answered it by speech.

"Is Miss Desmond bound to give way to my whims, pray? I have more selfishness in my little finger than she has in her whole composition. She is worth three times my weight, in pure gold. Ain't you, Maudie?"

"I should say," answered Maud, stiffly, "that a discussion of our comparative merits would be highly uninteresting to Mr. Plew."

Mr. Plew looked amazingly uncomfortable. The vicar came to his rescue.

"We are much obliged to your unremitting attention, Mr. Plew. And to it is owing, under Providence, the happy issue of this affair. I can venture to say that Sir John is very sensible of his debt to you. I have seen and spoken with him to-day for the first time."

"O, indeed, sir?"

"Yes; a very agreeable man, Sir John."

"I dare say he is, Mr. Levincourt. But you know the circumstances under which I have seen him have not been favourable exactly." Here Mr. Plew tittered faintly.

"H'm! Not a good patient, eh?"

"I won't say that, sir. But I should say he had not been accustomed to be restrained in any way. His servant manages him, though."

"Paul is a capital fellow; one of those excellent servants that one never finds in England."

"Indeed, sir?"

"No, our soil won't grow them. Or, if one is to be found here and there, they are, at any rate, not indigenous to Daneshire."

"Daneshire people, high or low, are not remarkable for civility," observed Veronica.

"Nor servility," added Maud.

"I suppose we shall soon be losing our guest," resumed the vicar. "He spoke to-day of relieving us of his presence, et cetera. The fact is, that to us personally his stay involves scarcely any inconvenience. But he will naturally be anxious to be gone as soon as may be. How soon do you think he will be able to travel?"

Mr. Plew could not tell. He would be able to judge better on that point when the sick man should have left his couch. He anticipated that Sir John would find himself very weak. There had been much prostration.

"I hear," proceeded Mr. Plew, "that Sir John Gale's groom and three hunters have been sent away from the Crown. I was at Shipley Magna to-day, and was told that the servant and horses had left for Danecester on Wednesday. They are bound for a place, that Sir John owns, in the south, somewhere. I forget the name of it. He is immensely rich, from what I can gather."

As thus Mr. Plew gossiped on, in a monotonous tone, the vicar listened, or seemed to listen, with half-closed eyes. His thoughts were in reality harking back to Veronica's phrase that Shipley must be "a mere little ugly blot" in Sir John's map of the world. And then the vicar indulged in some "sweet self-pity;" contrasting his days spent among Daneshire hinds, and under Daneshire skies, with the brightness of his three years' sojourn abroad. And yet those years spent in foreign lands had been haunted by the ghost of a lost love, and by a vain regret.

Presently Mr. Plew's talk turned on the

choir of St. Gildas, the progress it had made, and the desirability of introducing still further improvements. Then Mr. Levincourt roused himself to attend to what was being said. He began to talk himself, and he talked very well. Veronica and Maud sat a little apart, away from the glare of the fire, and held a whispered consultation as to their toilets on the nineteenth.

Maud had her share of natural girlish interest in the topic; but she tired of it long before her companion. With a quiet movement she drew a book from beneath a heap of coloured wools and canvas in her work-basket, and began to read, almost stealthily, half hidden behind the vicar's arm-chair.

Veronica advanced to the hearth, drew her chair up opposite to Mr. Plew, and disposed one foot, coquettishly peeping from under the folds of her dress, on the polished steel bar of the fender.

Mr. Plew stumbled, stammered, and lost the thread of his discourse.

"I beg your pardon," said the vicar, "I don't comprehend your last remark. I was saying that there are some pretty quaint bits of melody in those sonatas of Kozeluch. Miss Desmond plays the pianoforte part. Bring

your flute some evening, and try them over with her. The pianoforte may be unlocked again now, I suppose. When I said that Sir John's stay involved no personal inconvenience to us, I reckoned on our being allowed to hear the voice of music once again."

"Mr. Plew's flute has the softest of voices, papa. I am sure its aërial breathings could not penetrate to the blue chamber."

"Ah, there, now—there, Miss Veronica—Miss Levincourt—you're chaffing me."

"Eh?" (with wide-opened eyes, and superb arching of the brows).

"I beg pardon—laughing at me."

"How can you think so, Mr. Plew?"

"Oh, I know. But you are privileged, of course."

"Am I?"

"I mean young ladies in general are privileged to say what they please. I'm sure, now, that you don't really care about my flute playing. You would not like to hear it."

"But it is papa and Miss Desmond whom you play for. If they are satisfied, all is well. I don't pretend to be a virtuosa. And I will say this for your flute, Mr. Plew; it is very unobtrusive."

The sparkle of raillery in her eyes, the



saucy smile on her lip, the half-disdainful grace of her attitude, appeared to entrance the little surgeon. His eyes blinked as he looked at her. There was no revolt in his meek soul against the scarcely disguised insolence of her manner.

The vicar was a man of fine breeding. His daughter's behaviour to-night jarred on his taste. Mr. Levincourt did not usually trouble himself to observe, still less to correct, such shortcomings. But his interview with Sir John Gale had awakened old associations. He was conscious of the impression which his own polished address had made on his guest.

When Mr. Plew had departed, the vicar said, in a tone more of complaint than rebuke, "You should not tease that mild little man, Veronica. He does not understand raillery, and will either presume on it to become familiar, or else suffer from wounded feeling. Neither alternative is to be desired."

"Papa mio, he likes it!"

"But I do not. Besides, it is of you that I am thinking. Flippancy in a woman is, of all things, the most detestable. Not to speak of the matter on higher grounds" (the vicar habitually avoided all appeal to "higher grounds" in his non-professional moments), "it is utterly in bad taste—mauvais genre."

Veronica flushed high with anger, for her amour propre was stung; but by the time that she and Maud retired for the night, the cloud of temper had dispersed. Veronica came into Maud's room, and began chatting gaily about Mrs. Sheardown's dinner-party.

"Maud," said she, "Maud, I have decided on amber—a good rich amber, you know. I shall wear an amber satin sash with my white dress, and a streak of the same colour—just a band of it—in my hair."

"Very well."

"Very well? Are you in one of your frozen moods, Maud Hilda Desmond? If so, thaw as quickly as may be; I want to talk to you."

Maud wrapped a white dressing-gown around her, seated herself by the fire, and proceeded to loosen her straight silky hair from its plaits.

After a pause she said, "I do not wish to be frozen, Veronica; but your sudden changes of temperature are fatiguing. Just now, you were like a brooding thunder-cloud. At present, all is sunshine and blue sky. Do you suppose you are likely always to find persons able and willing to follow these capricious variations?"

Veronica took this speech very meekly. "I can't help it, Maudie," said she.

"Yes, you can; you can command yourself when there is a sufficient object in view. You don't exhibit these vagaries in the presence of people whom you desire to charm."

"I wonder why I let you talk so to me! I am your elder by two years, you little solemn white owl!"

Maud quietly released the last coil of her hair from its bonds, and said nothing. Suddenly Veronica knelt down by her companion's side and clasped her arms round her waist. So she remained, still and silent for some minutes. Then she slid down into her favourite posture on the rug, and exclaimed, without looking up: "I wish I could be good like you, Maud!"

"Nonsense! Good like me? I am not very good. But we can all be better if we try hard."

"I cannot. No; I cannot. I—I—want so many things that good people despise—or pretend to despise."

"What things?"

"O, I don't know, all sorts of things. Is there nothing *you* want?"

"Plenty of things I should like. But I

don't see how wanting things should prevent your being good."

"But I want vain, wicked, worldly things, Maudie!"

"And do you think vain, wicked, worldly things would make you happy?"

"Yes, I do. There! Don't look so scared and open your eyes so wide, white owl. That's the truth. You always advocate speaking the truth, you know. Good-night."

"Good-night, Veronica. You are in one of your perverse moods to-night. There is no use in arguing with you."

"Not a bit of use!"

"But you are wiser than your words. You know better."

"That's the worst of it! I wish I didn't know better. The fools are never troubled by knowing better. I know the better and want the worse. There now, you are frozen into an ice-maiden, again!"

Maud remained pale and silent, gazing straight before her.

Veronica waited a minute, lingering near the door, and then with a little defiant toss of the head, shrugged her shoulders and left the room, without another word.

The house was still; the vibrations of the

last stroke of eleven, boomed out by the deep-voiced bell of St. Gildas, were dying away; the glow of the fire had died down to a faint red glimmer, when a white figure glided noiselessly to Maud's bedside.

"Maudie! Maudie! Are you asleep?"

"Veronica! What is it? What is the matter?"

"Nothing. Kiss me, Maud. I cannot sleep until you have done so."

Maud raised her head from the pillow and kissed the other girl's cheek.

"Good-night, dear Veronica," she whispered.

"God bless you, Maudie!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

## CONVALESCENT.

“PAUL!” cried a harsh, querulous voice from behind the curtains of the bed in the guest-chamber at Shipley vicarage. “Paul! Where the devil——”

Then followed a string of oaths in English, French, and Italian; not pretty rose-water expletives, such as are occasionally attributed in the pages of fashionable novels to irresistible young guardsmen and such-like curled darlings of the world. There was no odour of rose-water about these oaths. They were vile, fierce, blasphemous phrases, borrowed from the vocabulary of the ignorant and degraded.

Sir John Gale was the speaker. Sir John Gale was impatient and angry. When that was the case, Sir John Gale was apt to express

himself in the strongest, coarsest, most ferocious language with which his tongue was acquainted.

Presently the door opened, and Paul came into the room. Paolo Paoli was a Piedmontese. He was a short, thick, ugly, middle-aged man, with grave, light-coloured eyes, set under overhanging brows. He had a shock of grizzled hair, and a broad forehead, and his face was clean shaven.

Paul had been a courier, and in this capacity had attracted the attention, and won the favourable opinion, of Sir John Gale. The latter had elevated Paul to the post of confidential and personal attendant on himself. A "confidential" attendant might seem at first sight to be of small value to Sir John, considering that he never voluntarily made a confidence to any human being. But there are *involuntary* confidences which we all make daily and hourly respecting ourselves. The recipient of these in Sir John's case needed to be staunch, patient, and discreet. Paul was all three.

He entered the chamber bearing in his hand a tray covered with a napkin, on which was placed a small basin of soup. His master saluted him with a volley of abuse for having

delayed. Paul very gravely set down the tray, raised his master in the bed, supported his back with pillows, threw a dressing-gown over his shoulders, and then, pulling from his waist-coat-pocket a large silver watch attached to a black ribbon, said, "It is time for your soup, sir."

Sir John tasted the soup, made a grimace of disgust, and launched another volley of oaths at Paul.

"This is uneatable—beastly! They have put sage, or some damned thing, into it. Ugh!"

"Very good soup, sir," replied Paul, imperturbably. "No sage. I saw it made. You eat it warm, sir. It will give strength. Very good soup."

The convalescent continued to grumble at every spoonful; but he swallowed the savoury nourishing broth to the last drop. And then Paul removed the tray, mended the fire, and proceeded to lay out his master's clothes; for the invalid was to leave his room to-day, for the first time since his accident.

Sir John looked upward from among his pillows to where the window gave a glimpse of pale blue March sky, fretted by the skeleton branches of the yet bare trees.



"It's a fine day, eh?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Cold. You must be well wrapped, sir."

"What sort of place is the sitting-room?"

Paul described, as well as he could, the apartment which he called the salon, and with the aspect of which the reader is already acquainted. He further stated that there was a comfortable arm-chair at Sir John's disposal; that a screen and a curtain had been arranged behind this chair so as to exclude all drafts, and that a footstool had been placed in front of it.

"How devilish weak I am!" exclaimed Sir John, with an almost piteous expression of face, as he essayed, with his servant's assistance, to dress himself.

This was not the first time that he had left his bed. He had been wrapped in a dressing-gown, and seated in an easy chair by the fire-side in his own chamber, on several previous occasions. But now he was to venture into the sitting-room, have tea with the vicar's family, and make the acquaintance of the young ladies.

On the part of these latter, there was a good deal of curiosity respecting their guest. The two girls did not even know with any accuracy

what his personal appearance might be. True, they had seen him—if it could be called seeing—when he was swooning, bleeding, mud-bespattered, on the ground at the gate. But who could judge of a gentleman's looks under such circumstances?

When Sir John Gale stood for a moment at the open door of the parlour leaning on Paul's arm, and looking his first look at the vicar's daughter and ward, this is what their eyes beheld: a man of middle height, slenderly made, and somewhat high-shouldered, dressed with scrupulous neatness—even with elegance—and bearing traces in his face and his attitude of recent severe illness.

How much of the worn aspect of his face, and the unwholesomeness of the skin—which looked as though it should naturally have been ruddy and plumply filled out, but which now hung white and flaccid over the cheeks, and in baggy wrinkles beneath the prominent dark eyes—how much of the sickly whiteness of the bony hands, white as a woman's, but knotted and ploughed with deep lines like those of a very aged man—how much, in brief, of the general debility, and air of being used up, now perceptible in Sir John's aspect, was due to recent suffering, and how much of

all this had belonged to it for years past, the vicar's family could not tell. They accepted his appearance as being the natural appearance of a man no longer young, who had just arisen from a bed of sickness where his mind and body had both been severely tried.

He had sandy hair, slightly grizzled, carefully brushed, and so disposed as to hide, as far as possible, a bald patch on the crown of the head. He wore a pointed beard, and moustaches that curled fiercely upward. His nose was well shaped, although rather sharp and beak-like. The tell-tale mouth was partly concealed by the fringe of moustache. Altogether he might have been pronounced a handsome man; and he *was* pronounced to be so by many persons.

In the sitting-room awaiting him were Mr. Levincourt with Maud and Veronica. The latter wore a winter dress of rich claret colour, relieved at the throat and wrists by ruffles of white lace—very fine old lace that had belonged to her mother, and that was, in truth, a little out of place on her plain stuff gown.

Maud was an inch or two shorter than her companion; she had broad, finely-moulded shoulders, and a noble white throat supporting a head whose form and proportions were

almost perfect. Her features were irregular, and not one of them could be called handsome, save the almond-shaped blue eyes set rather deeply under broad brows. Her wide mobile mouth was not beautiful, though its sweetness, when she spoke or smiled, was irresistible. But one beauty Maud Desmond possessed which appealed to the least cultivated appreciation: this was her hair, which was of a rare golden hue. When the sunlight fell on it, it shone as though each separate hair had been drawn out of burnished metal, and it was softer to the touch than silk.

On these two girls, and on their surroundings, looked, for the first time, Sir John Gale.

The vicar hastened forward to offer his guest the support of his arm, which the latter gentleman accepted after a moment's hesitation.

"I am ashamed," said Sir John, with a frank smile, which showed a bright range of false teeth, "ashamed and sorry to be such a bore and a nuisance. But the truth is, I had no idea, until I began to dress just now, how entirely my strength was prostrated. It seems absurd, but I am absolutely as weak as a baby."

"We are truly rejoiced, most truly so, to

welcome you among us. Your strength will come back, undoubtedly. It is now only a question of time. Have patience yet awhile. My daughter, Sir John Gale. My ward, Miss Desmond. Paul, be so good as to wheel your master's chair a little more this way."

The baronet took the hand which Veronica had half offered, half withheld, and bowed low. Maud saluted him by a smile and a bend of the head, which he returned by a still lower bow than the first.

"I trust," said Sir John, when he was seated, "that Mr. Levincourt has been so very kind as to explain to you how impossible I find it to express in any adequate way my sense of your great goodness and hospitality."

His glance, as he spoke, included the two young ladies.

"We are very glad to see you so much better," said Maud.

"And the truth is, we have done nothing at all for you, Sir John; Paul would not let us," added Veronica.

"That man of yours is an excellent fellow," said the vicar, when Paul had left the room. "There are no such servants to be had in England now-a-days. Veronica, give Sir John some tea, and then ring for another large cup

for me. I cannot be persuaded to drink my tea out of a thing no bigger than an egg-shell," he added, turning to his guest.

"Not to mention, papa, that these tiny tea-cups are quite old-fashioned now!" exclaimed Veronica, with a bright, saucy smile, which became her infinitely.

"Are they? How do you know? We live here, Sir John, in the most countrified of country parsonages, and yet——. But, upon my honour, I believe that if you were to stick a woman on the top of the column of St. Simeon Stylites, she would nevertheless contrive in some mysterious way to know what was 'in fashion' and what wasn't."

"Perhaps it is a sixth sense implanted in us by nature, Uncle Charles," said Maud, demurely. "You know the inferior animals *have* these mysterious instincts."

Sir John's eyes had hitherto been contemplating the glossy coils of Veronica's ebon hair, as she bent her head over the tea equipage. Now, he turned and regarded Maud more attentively than he yet had done.

"I beg pardon," said he to the vicar. "I thought that when you did me the honour to present me to Miss—Miss Dermott—you called her your ward?"

"Yes; and so I am," answered Maud, taking no notice of the mispronunciation of her name. "I have no right whatever to call Mr. Levincourt 'Uncle Charles,' Sir John. But I have been let to do so ever since I came here as a very small child. I began by calling him 'Zio,' as Mrs. Levincourt taught me, in Italian fashion. But very soon my British tongue translated the appellation, and my guardian has been 'Uncle Charles' ever since."

Sir John did not appear profoundly interested in this explanation, although he listened with polite attention while Maud spoke.

Presently he and the vicar began discoursing of foreign travel and foreign places, and the girls listened almost in silence.

"Ah!" sighed the vicar, plaintively. "Bel cielo d'Italia! I know not what price I would not pay for another glimpse of that intense living blue, after the fogs and clouds of Dane-shire."

Mr. Levincourt had succeeded in persuading himself that the three years he had spent abroad had been years of unmixed enjoyment.

"I tell you what it is, Mr. Levincourt," said Sir John, passing his bony white hand over

his moustache ; "Italy is not the pleasant residence for foreigners that it must have been when you first knew it. What with their unionism, and constitutionalism, and liberalism, they've sent the whole thing to the——; they've spoilt the society altogether," concluded the baronet, discreetly changing the form of his phrase.

"Really?"

"Well, in fifty ways, things are altered for the worse, even in my experience of Italy, which dates now, at intervals, some twelve or fourteen years back. For one thing, that British Moloch, Mrs. Grundy, has begun to be set up there."

Veronica raised her eyes and uttered a little exclamation expressive of disgust.

"I should not think that mattered very much," said Maud, half aloud.

Sir John caught the impulsively uttered words, and replied at once. "Not matter? Ah, Jeunesse! I assure you, my dear young lady, that it matters a great deal. Mrs. Grundy is a very terrible and hideous old idol indeed. She can bully you, and worry you, and rap you on the head with her twopenny wooden staff."

Maud coloured high at being thus addressed,



but she answered bravely. "Still I cannot see that she has power to hurt good people. I thought it was only the professional pickpocket who objected to seeing a constable at every street corner!"

Sir John Gale's studied good breeding partook less of the nature of polish—which beautifies and displays the natural grain of the wood—than of veneer. The veneer, though not unskilfully applied, occasionally cracked, revealing glimpses of a rather coarse and ugly material beneath it. He had especially an egotistical proneness to attribute chance allusions to himself.

"Really!" he exclaimed. "I am to conclude that you suppose that I dislike Mrs. Grundy because I fear her? She is the policeman at the street corner, and your humble servant is the professional pickpocket?"

Maud looked painfully shocked. The colour receded from her face, and then flushed back brighter than ever as she said:

"Oh, Sir John! How could you suppose——? I—I beg your pardon. I had no intention or idea of any such meaning."

But Sir John had already begun a discussion with the vicar as to the comparative merits of Tuscan and Neapolitan wines, and seemed to

have dismissed Maud's unlucky speech from his mind.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly, until the early hour at which it was deemed well for the invalid to retire. The vicar was delighted with his guest. Mr. Levincourt declared that he felt like some shipwrecked mariner who had passed years in a savage island, and to whose door the winds and the waves had drifted a stranger from the distant lands of civilisation.

"It would be more civil, papa, if you had said that we were *three* shipwrecked mariners. A kind of Swiss Family Robinson," observed Veronica, laughing.

The exaggeration of all this grated on Maud's common sense. But she repressed the protest which trembled on her lips.

"Maudie looks sagely disapproving," said Veronica, glancing at her.

"I am disapproving myself," replied Maud. "How pert and flippant Sir John must have thought me! My impulsive speeches are always getting me into trouble."

"O! I do not believe that Sir John will give the matter another thought. But if it weighs on your conscience you can explain, the next time you see him, that——"

"Ah, no: there are some things that cannot be explained—to Sir John Gale."

"Why not to him? He is not stupid."

"No, he is not stupid, but——. He is like some richly embroidered stuff I once saw: very gorgeous and magnificent at a distance, but a little coarse in the grain, and not to be touched with impunity by a sensitive skin."

"H'm! You little shy, proud, *English* owl!" exclaimed Veronica.

And then for a full half hour she remained staring silently into the fire, until her satin cheeks were quite scorched and crimson.

The next day was the nineteenth, and the two girls were in a state of agreeable excitement at the prospect of the dinner-party which awaited them.

The kitchen was pervaded by a smell of ironing. Joanna was smoothing out dainty little tuckers, and a long white muslin skirt over which Veronica's gold-coloured sash was presently to stream gracefully. Early in the afternoon, a wooden box arrived by a special messenger from Danecester, and was found to contain two bouquets carefully wrapped in cotton wool.

Sir John Gale—who had not yet left his room at that early hour—sent Paul into the

vicar's study with a little note, in which Sir John begged that the young ladies would do him the honour to wear a few flowers that he had taken the liberty of procuring for them.

"A few flowers!" cried Veronica, with sparkling eyes. "They are exquisite. They come from Covent Garden. There's the man's name in the box. Look at these white moss-roses, and the Cape jasmine! Your bouquet is mixed, Maudie; mine is all white. How perfect! Do look pleased, little icicle!"

"I am pleased," said Maud, with a certain constraint. "And very, very much obliged."

Veronica carried the superb exotics into the kitchen, and exhibited them with transport to the servants. The young lady had a genuine passion for applause and admiration. She could not be entirely happy without an audience to witness her happiness. It had been the same from her baby days. When, as quite little girls, they had owned a shaggy pony which was supposed to be the joint property of the two children, Maud had heartily enjoyed trotting out into the wildest bits of country she could find; but Veronica's delight had been to find an excuse for riding through the village, or even, if that might be, into

Shipley Magna. And her chubby cheeks would glow, and her eyes would brighten, when she heard passers-by exclaiming that that was the vicar's little lass; and hadn't she a pair of eyes? And didn't she look like a fairy, flying along with her black curls streaming over her shoulders? So now, when she had the costly flowers in her hand, she could not resist displaying them to the servants; and she took a creamy spotless camellia from the outside of her own bouquet and laid it amongst the rich waves of her hair, and stood with a beaming face to be admired.

Catherine was in ecstasies, and declared, when her young mistress had gone away again, that she liked Miss Veronica, that she did, for she had such pleasant good-natured ways with her.

But old Joanna smiled shrewdly, and observed that the lass was the very moral of her poor mother in some things; and that a bit of show-off was the breath of her nostrils. "Not but what," added Joanna, "Miss Veronica has more sense in her little finger than the poor missis had in all her body. And a will she has—has the lass—that's as stout as steel! A will for anything she fancies, I mean: she can't be stubborn and strong about doing

things as is only her duty. But if there's summat as she wants for her own good pleasure, you'll see she'll get it. It was the same wi' her since she could toddle, poor lass! Many a forbidden fruit she's aten, an' many a stomach-ache she's had for her pains!"

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE DINNER AT LOWATER.

VERY jolly Captain Sheardown looked, and very radiant his wife, as they welcomed the party from the vicarage into their warm, well-lighted drawing-room.

"Your reverence has had a cold drive," said Captain Sheardown, jocularly. And then he and the vicar, and Mr. Snowe—who, with his son, Herbert, had arrived not many minutes previously—stood on the hearth-rug and talked of the weather, and the hunting, and the Colenso controversy, or whatsoever topic was then chiefly arousing the attention of the British public. Mrs. Sheardown, meanwhile, welcomed the girls, and installed them in comfortable arm-chairs, one on either side of her. Nelly Sheardown was about thirty-five years old. She had not been married more than eight years, for she and the captain

had been constant to each other through a long engagement ; and Tom Sheardown's head was grey before he could declare that his fight with fortune was fought out, and could claim Nelly Cherbrook for his wife. He was twenty years her senior ; and there appeared to be even more difference between their ages. For Mrs. Sheardown looked younger now than she had done before her marriage, during the weary years of waiting that had sickened the heart with hope deferred, and graven lines in the face.

"How is your guest ?" asked Mrs. Sheardown of Veronica.

"Sir John is getting much better : nearly well, thank you. It is such a comfort for papa to feel assured that all danger is over. It was a great responsibility, you know, having a total stranger in the house in that state ;" thus, Veronica.

"None of his relations came to see him ?"

"He has lived abroad, and has no family ties in England, Mrs. Sheardown."

"Poor old man ! It is a lonely position for him."

Veronica gave a rapid glance at her hostess's honest face, and then buried her own amongst her flowers.



Maud laughed heartily. "Dear Mrs. Sheardown," she said, "do you know I have a notion that Sir John Gale does not by any means look upon himself in that light."

"In what light?"

"As a 'lonely old man.'"

"Oh! I thought—I didn't know——"

"Lady Alicia Renwick," cried Captain Sheardown's old servant, throwing open the door. And the hostess rose and went to welcome the new arrival.

Lady Alicia Renwick was the daughter of a Scotch peer, and the widow of a gentleman who had made a large fortune in some ironworks. Still further to the south than Danecester, was a great black district whose horizon glared at night with a hundred lurid fires. And there the deceased Mr. Renwick had owned strange-looking brick structures, like pyramids with the angles rounded off, and with smoke and flame issuing from their summits. Lady Alicia did not inherit all the gold that was melted out of the iron-ore in these grimy crucibles. Mr. Renwick had a numerous family by a former wife, and had provided for them all, handsomely. But his relic enjoyed an income which would have appeared princely in her maiden eyes, and which she now characterised

as "genteel starvation." For there is nothing we become more easily accustomed to than the possession of riches. And a genuine love of money is one of the few passions that age, with its hollow voice crying "All is vanity!" has no power to weaken.

Lady Alicia was a tall, handsome, stiff old lady, who took a gloomy view of life, and who had a good deal of wit of a dry, bitter, biting flavour.

Her ladyship's entrance into the room was closely followed by that of a gentleman. Captain Sheardown, after having greeted Lady Alicia, called to him.

"Come here, Hugh. I want to introduce you to the vicar of Shipley. Mr. Levincourt, this is my young friend Hugh Lockwood. You may have heard me speak of his father."

"Who is the gentleman?" asked Lady Alicia, half aside, of Mrs. Sheardown, and looking across the room as she spoke, with a not unfavourable glance.

"Mr. Hugh Lockwood, Lady Alicia. You may remember, perhaps, that his father was a great protégé of the old Admiral many, many years ago, that is, before I ever saw my husband."

"Oh, aye, to be sure! I recollect it all

very well now. Robert Lockwood was a Daneshire man born and bred. He came of humble folks, small tradespeople in Shipley Magna, but he had an aspiring soul, and he got it into his head that he was born to be a great painter. Admiral Sheardown had a taste for the arts, and helped the lad to an education. And that is his son, eh? Not bad looking!"

Mrs. Sheardown explained in a few words that Hugh's father had done credit to his patron's discrimination, and had attained a good position amongst British artists. Robert Lockwood had died some years ago. His son was articled pupil to an architect in London: and having had occasion to visit Danecester on professional business, Captain Sheardown had invited the young man to stay for a few days at Lowater House.

Presently arrived Dr. Begbie, rector of Hammick, with his wife and daughter, and Miss Boyce: a lady who was staying at the rectory on a visit; and these completed the number of invited guests.

Betsy Boyce, as her friends and acquaintances called her, was a simpering, lively old lady, who prided herself on her thorough knowledge of "society." She lived in London

when she did not happen to be visiting at some country house. But her residence in the metropolis was never protracted ; and her address when there, was not revealed to many persons. She called cousins with half the names in the Peerage : and indeed Miss Boyce found a phrase or two out of that august volume act as an "open sesame" to many a comfortable home where bed and board were at her service for as long as she chose to remain. She was herself perfectly good-humoured and humble minded ; and despite her eccentricities she was liked and esteemed by those people who knew her best. But she had taken up the Peerage as a kind of profession, just as some reverend Mussulman divine adopts the Koran. She lived by its aid very comfortably ; whereas Miss Elizabeth Sophia Augusta Boyce, with very few pounds per annum to call her own, and without any aristocratic connexions, would have found it a rather hard task to make both ends meet. "Besides, my dear," she would say confidentially to some intimate friend, "I don't really humbug anybody. Papa and mamma were both thoroughly well connected. It never did them any good that I know of ; but you see it is a great mercy for me. If it were

not for my family and my knowledge of who's who, I might mope myself in a dingy lodging from January to December. And for me, who am the most sociable creature living, and who detest solitude, it is really and truly a blessing and a most providential circumstance that there are persons who care very much for that kind of thing."

Miss Boyce, then, was not unduly proud of her descent, but she had a pet vanity, founded—as are not most of our pet vanities?—on a much less real and solid basis of fact; she had somehow lost her reckoning of time, thought herself still an attractive-looking woman, and devoutly believed that mankind was deluded by her wig.

Captain Sheardown gallantly led out Lady Alicia Renwick to dinner, and the rest followed in due order.

To old Mr. Snowe, the banker, was allotted the honour of conducting Miss Boyce. Mr. Snowe was a slow-witted, matter-of-fact man. His manner was pompous, and the habitual expression of his heavy face seemed to say, with an air of puzzled surprise, "God bless my soul! If I did not know myself to be so very important a personage, I should suspect you to be laughing at me."

During the early part of the dinner Mr. Snowe was too honestly engrossed in eating and drinking to pay much attention to his neighbour: but when the later stages of the repast arrived he found himself compelled to observe Miss Boyce's lavish coils of false hair, flowing curls, and colossal chignon. He became a prey to a species of fascination that obliged him to watch some delicate artificial flowers which crowned the lady's head-gear, and which nodded, shook, and trembled, without intermission, in dumb accompaniment to their wearer's vivacious flow of talk.

The dinner passed pleasantly under the genial influence of the host and hostess. When Dr. Begbie rose, and, in an effective speech, rolled out in his richest tones, proposed the health of his dear friends, Captain and Mrs. Sheardown, and wished them many happy returns of that auspicious day, the general enthusiasm was quite ardent. Even Lady Alicia desired the servant to fill her glass a bumper, and grasped her host's hand with her bony fingers as she tossed off the champagne.

Mrs. Begbie shed tears. But that may have been from habit: for Mrs. Begbie always made a point of crying at her husband's sermons. And perhaps his manly voice, alone, had power

so to affect her. As compensation, however, when Captain Sheardown returned thanks, Mrs. Begbie was perfectly dry-eyed.

When the ladies left the table—by which time Mr. Snowe was openly and undisguisedly contemplating Miss Boyce's luxuriant locks with a fixed and stony glare—and returned to the drawing-room, they resumed a theme which had been discussed at the dinner-table, and on which Lady Alicia and Betsy Boyce were the chief talkers.

"Gale? Gale?" said Miss Boyce, meditatively. "No such name amongst the people *I* know. Sir John Gale! Never heard of him."

"How *very* strange!" murmured Mrs. Begbie.

"But there must be some people, I suppose, of whom Miss Boyce never heard?" said Lady Alicia. She spoke with a strong Scotch accent, rolling her r's very much, and pronounced "never heard" "neverr harrd."

"Millions!" exclaimed Miss Boyce, absolutely squeaking in her desire to be emphatic. "Oh, millions! Your ladyship's married name, for instance, was quite unfamiliar to me, although I remember very well—that is, I have often heard mamma speak of your father, Lord Strathgorm."

Lady Alicia smiled grimly.

"Well," said she, "my dear Miss Boyce, ye might very well remember poor papa yourself, for he only died in the spring of 'thirty.' "

"Goodness!" exclaimed Miss Begbie, clasp-  
ing her hands. Suppose Sir John Gale should  
turn out to be an impostor! A highwayman,  
or something. No: I don't mean a highway-  
man; I believe there are no highwaymen now,  
but I mean a swindler, or something; don't  
you know? Goodness!"

"Nonsense, Emmy!" said Miss Begbie's  
mamma. Veronica's face looked unutterable  
scorn, but she said nothing. The hostess  
asked Miss Begbie to play for them, and that  
young lady complied, not unwillingly. She  
drew very good music out of the grand piano.  
Her mother was complacent, Lady Alicia  
listened with a softened face. Betsy Boyce's  
ringlets quivered again as she nodded her head  
in time to a waltz of Chopin. Upon this  
peaceful scene, the gentlemen entered in a  
body. Captain Sheardown took a seat beside  
Miss Boyce, and made her a few gallant  
speeches.

"Go along, you false creature!" cried Miss  
Betsy, smiling and tossing her head. "Men  
were deceivers ever. One foot on sea, and  
one on shore. Exactly! And you sailor



animals are the most faithless of all. But I always loved the blue jackets from a girl, from a mere child! I recollect a most charming creature with whom I once fell desperately in love. He was an Admiral of the Red, and had only one leg, and a frightful scar on his face where a cutlass had gashed one of his eyebrows in two. He was seventy-four, and I adored him. It was in Ireland, at Delaney Park, in the year after—in short, I was a mere baby, not fifteen!”

“At Delaney Park? Really! That was your grandpapa’s place, Maud, was it not?” asked Mrs. Sheardown.

“Possible! Are you of the Delaneys of Delaney, Miss Desmond? Ah, I remember the youngest girl married Sidney Desmond. To be sure! The eldest, Hilda, made a great marriage at the end of her first season. Poor girl! H’m, h’m, h’m! What is she doing, poor Lady Tallis? And where is she? No one hears or sees anything of her now.”

“We do not hear very often from my Aunt Hilda,” said Maud, gravely. “Do you want me to accompany that song of Schumann’s for you, Mr. Snowe?”

Maud walked away to the piano, and Betsy Boyce poured into the greedy ears of Mrs.

Begbie and the old banker a recital of Lady Tallis's troubles.

"It was considered a great match, *the* match of the year (excepting, of course, the young Earl of Miniver, who was, you know, the richest minor in England, and married Lady Ermengarde Ermine, the day after he came of age); and, I remember, poor old Sir William Delaney was so delighted."

Mrs. Begbie, who was transported with delight at hearing *her* friend and visitor so fluent and familiar with these noble names, shook her head gently, and said that that was what came of worldliness. And how strange it was that parents should seek heartless grandeur for their children! For her part, she fervently trusted that Emmy would choose the better part, and look for sound principles in her husband, preferring them to wealth or rank. Though, on the score of birth (if Emmy were influenced by such mundane attractions), there were few families to whose alliance she might not aspire, her grandfather on one side having been a Gaffer—and it was unnecessary to say that the Gaffers were among the few old *pure Saxon* families extant—and her paternal great-grandmamma a De Winkyn.

"How was it, then?" asked Mr. Snowe,

senior, in his pompous, deliberate tone. "Do I follow you? Was Lady Tallis's marriage an inauspicious one, hey?"

"Mercy on us!" cried Betsy Boyce. "Inauspicious! Her husband is one of the most *dreadful* persons! Hilda Delaney was a pretty, good-natured fool when he married her. It was like the wolf and the lamb; he gobbled her up in no time—crunched her bones."

"Law!" exclaimed Miss Emmy.

Mr. Snowe cast a rolling and rather bewildered glance around. "That," said he, impressively, "is shocking, indeed."

"But how do you mean, Miss Boyce?" said Emmy, who took things a little literally, and was excessively inquisitive. "Of course I know that Lady Tallis was not really gobbled up—he, he, he! you have such funny sayings—but what did her husband do?"

Herbert Snowe's song ceased at this moment, and the conversation at the other end of the room came to an abrupt close.

Before the party broke up Mrs. Sheardown came and sat by the vicar of Shipley, and told him, smilingly, that she had a petition to prefer to him. She wanted him to allow Maud to remain at Lowater for a few days. The captain and she would bring Maud in to

Shipley when they came to church on Sunday; meanwhile they would send to the vicarage for anything she might need. In short, they had set their hearts on it, and Mr. Levincourt must not refuse.

"I suspect you are not often accustomed to have any request of yours refused, Mrs. Sheardown," said the vicar, gallantly. "If Maud be willing—as, no doubt, she is—I consent with pleasure to her remaining."

Presently, Maud made her way quietly across the room to Veronica. The latter was seated on a small ottoman, which was made to hold only two persons, and was so contrived that one of its occupants must turn his back on the company in the drawing-room while the other faced them. Veronica was leaning back against the crimson cushion. The dark rich background enhanced the purity of her white dress and the pearly tints of her shoulders. Familiar as her beauty was to Maud, she yet paused an instant to look admiringly on the picture presented by the vicar's daughter. Veronica was radiant with gratified vanity and the consciousness of being admired. It heightened the bloom on her cheek, and made her eyes bright with a liquid lustre.

As Maud approached, a gentleman, who had been occupying the other seat on the ottoman, rose to yield it to her.

"Do not let me disturb you," said Maud. "I merely wished to say a word to Miss Levin-court."

The young man bowed, and walked a few paces apart.

Maud told her friend of Mrs. Sheardown's invitation. A strange look passed over Veronica's face. At first it seemed like a flash of satisfaction; but then came an expression of regret; almost, one would have said, of a momentary alarm. "Shall you stay, Maudie?" said she, taking the other girl's hand in both her own.

"Uncle Charles has said that I may, and—— But I will not stay, dear, if you think it selfish, or if you fancy you will miss me."

"Of course I shall miss you, Maudie."

"Then I won't stay. I will tell Mrs. Sheardown so."

At this moment Emma Begbie came up to them, giggling after her manner, which was half spiteful, whole silly.

"My goodness, Miss Levincourt!" she exclaimed, bending over the ottoman, "*what a*

flirtation you have been having with that young Lockwood! What is he like to talk to?"

"Very much like a gentleman," answered Veronica, with cold hauteur.

"O gracious! But he isn't really one, you know. Lady Alicia knows all about his father. He was quite a common person. But isn't he handsome, this young man? You must mind what you're about, if you stay in the same house with him, Miss Desmond, for I am sure Miss Levincourt would never forgive you if you were to make yourself too agreeable to him. She evidently looks upon him as her conquest. Don't you, Miss Levincourt? He, he, he!"

Veronica looked after her scornfully, as she went away. "What an ill-bred idiot that girl is," she said. Then, after a moment, she added, "Of course I shall miss you, Maudie. But you must stay. You will not be away very long?"

"Only till Sunday. Was that gentleman who was talking to you Mr. Lockwood? I had not been introduced to him."

"Yes. Good-night, Maudie. The fly is come, I suppose, for I see papa telegraphing across the room. Good-bye."

Veronica threw herself back in a corner of the fly, wrapped in her warm shawl and hood, and remained silent. The vicar fell asleep. In about ten minutes their vehicle drew aside to allow another carriage to pass. It was the well-appointed equipage of the rector of Hammick. The horses dashed along swiftly, their silver-mounted harness glistening in the moonlight.

Veronica drew still further back into her corner, and closed her eyes, but she did not sleep. Her brain was busy. And the jolting of the crazy old fly from the Crown Inn at Shipley Magna kept up a sort of rhythmic accompaniment to the dance of strange fancies, hopes, and plans, that whirled through her mind.

## CHAPTER X.

## THE GAUNTLET.

SIR JOHN GALE, after his first appearance in the vicar's parlour, came daily to sit there. His afternoon visit became an established custom, and, after the second time, it seemed as though he had been familiar there for years. He grew stronger very quickly. It was not long before he began to speak of departing. There seemed, indeed, to be no valid reason why he should linger at the vicarage. And yet he stayed on.

"I shall go abroad as soon as we have some assurance of milder weather," he said to Mr. Levincourt. "Spring is delicious in Italy. I shall wait, however, until I hear that the Alps are not *too* impassable; for, of all things, I detest a sea voyage, and the two hours in the Channel are always worse to me than a week's land travelling. Meanwhile——"



"Meanwhile, why not remain here?" said the vicar. "There is no need for you to make a move until you set off for the south."

To this Sir John Gale replied that his intrusion at Shipley vicarage had already been long enough; that he should never forget his host's kindness, but it behoved him not to trespass on it too far; that, although he certainly had no ties of friendship or relationship which specially claimed his presence just then, in any other part of England, he must nevertheless make up his mind to say farewell to Shipley as soon as the doctor's permission to travel could be obtained.

All this, and more to the same purpose, said Sir John Gale. And yet he lingered on.

The spring set in early, after a severe winter. By the beginning of April, there came soft, bright days, with a southerly breeze which tempted the inmates of the vicarage forth from the house. Some such days immediately followed the dinner-party at Mrs. Sheardown's.

One afternoon, Sir John, beholding from his chamber window Miss Levincourt strolling in the garden, presently ventured forth to join her.

"May I walk here, Miss Levincourt?" he

asked, pausing at the threshold of the glass-door that led into the garden.

"O, by all means. But is it sunny enough here? The evergreens give a very damp shade. If you are not afraid to venture further, you would have more warmth and a southern aspect there, beyond the gate."

So Veronica and her father's guest wandered slowly on and on, looking out over the common dappled with cloud shadows, gazing at the far, hazy horizon, pausing now and again for a moment, but still proceeding in their course until they reached the churchyard of St. Gildas.

Sir John declared that the balmy air was a cordial that did him more good than any medicines. Still, warm as it was for the season, he dared not sit in the churchyard to rest, and as he turned to go back, he was evidently tired.

A frown darkened his face. "I ought not to have come so far without Paul," he said. "I am still so dev—so unaccountably weak."

"It is my fault," exclaimed Veronica. "Let me be Paul's substitute." She offered Sir John the support of her arm with perfect tact and self-possession, as though it were the most natural and ordinary proceeding in the world.

After that occasion the daily walk became a matter of course.

The temporary absence of Miss Desmond from the vicarage was by no means regretted by Sir John. In truth, he did not like Maud. Some word to that effect escaped him in speaking to Veronica.

"You must not say that to papa, Sir John," said she, looking quietly up at him.

"Say what?"

"That you do not like Miss Desmond."

"Of course not. I never said so to any one. It would be untrue. Miss Desmond is a very charming young lady, very charming and very young, and perhaps her youth explains a slight touch, the very slightest touch, of—self-sufficiency. We grow tolerant and sceptical as we get older. Hélas!"

"Maud is not self-sufficient. She is only very earnest and very honest."

"Miss Desmond is happy in having so warm and generous a friend. And pray do not accuse me of any want of respect for Miss Desmond. I have no doubt that she possesses the most admirable qualities; only her manner is a little—a little hard and chilly, if I may venture to say so."

"At heart she is really very impulsive."

"Is she?"

"But she has great self-command in general."

"I am bound to say that she must have. Anything less impulsive than Miss Desmond's manner I have seldom seen. But forgive me. I will not say another word that shall even seem like disparagement of one for whom *you* entertain so warm an affection."

Sir John spoke with a winning deferential softness of manner, and looked with undisguised admiration into the beautiful face by his side.

Such looks were now not rare on his part. Veronica, in her retrospective meditations, could recal many such glances; could recal, too, many soft words, so soft as to be almost tender, spoken in her ear during the afternoon stroll in meadow or garden. She was flattered and touched by the deference towards herself of this man, whose character she perceived to be imperious, almost arrogant, to the rest of the world.

Others had been admiring and deferential before now. Mr. Plew would endure her scornful raillery with abject submission; but then Mr. Plew was habitually submissive to

every one, and was, after all (she reflected), a very insignificant individual indeed.

That young man, that Mr. Lockwood, the other evening, had shown himself very sensible to the fascinations of her brightness and her beauty. He was not abject, truly. No; he was manly and modest, and he looked, and spoke, and moved in a way which showed that he thought himself the equal of any one among Captain Sheardown's guests. Nevertheless, in Veronica's apprehension, he was not so. Although she had chosen to put down Emma Begbie's ill-breeding, she had been, to a certain degree, mortified by her contemptuous tone.

Sir John Gale was a different kind of person from this young Lockwood, whose father had been educated by the bounty of Admiral Sheardown.

To be "my Lady Gale"!

The words rang in her ears. She whispered them to herself in the solitude of her chamber. Wealth, station, and all that was alluring to the girl's vanity and ambition, were in the sound.

In those earliest years of existence, during which, as some think, the deepest and most abiding impressions are made on the character,

the ideal of happiness held up before Veronica's eyes was an essentially ignoble one. The possession of such delights as may be summed up in the vulgar word "finery" she was directly or indirectly taught to look upon as an aim to be attained. As she grew older, and the life that lay before her at Shipley-in-the-Wold became clear to her apprehension, an eating discontent took hold upon her like a slow poison. At times, in recalling her mother's stories of her young days in Florence, a passion of envy and longing would make the girl's heart sick within her. Not that those things which had made Stella Bartlett gay and happy would have altogether satisfied her daughter. The latter had more pride and less simplicity. Stella liked to "far figura," as the Italian phrase goes: to make a figure in the world. But her ambition never soared on a very daring wing. She was perfectly contented to accept Russian hospodareses laden with emeralds, or even Princesses della Scatoli da Salsa, crowned with paste diamonds and enamelled with effrontery, as her social superiors, and to enjoy the spectacle of their real or sham splendours exactly as she enjoyed the spangles and tinsel of the ballet in carnival.

Not so Veronica. She would willingly be second to none. There were moments when the chance mention of Maud Desmond's family, or an allusion to the glories of the ancestral mansion at Delaney, made her sore and jealous. She would even be rendered irritably impatient by Maud's simple indifference on the score of her ancestry; though the least display of pride of birth on the part of her father's ward would have been intolerable to Veronica's haughty spirit.

Yet Veronica was no monster of selfish consistency. She was often visited by better impulses and a longing for a nobler aim in life. But the first shock of practical effort and self-denial repulsed her like a douche of ice-cold water. There came no reaction, no after-glow, and she shrank back shivering, with a piteous cry of, "*I cannot be good.*"

She knew herself to be wretchedly dissatisfied. And, although her youth and bodily health at intervals asserted their elasticity, and broke forth into a wild flow of gaiety and good spirits, she was yet, at nineteen years old, secretly consumed by dreary discontent.

Then she told herself that it was easy for happy people to be good. "If I were but happy, I should be good, and kind, and generous," she said.

And latterly the thought had taken possession of her that it would make her happy to become my Lady Gale.

Opportunity is the divinity which shapes the ends of most love affairs, let them be rough-hewn how they will. Under the favouring influence of residence beneath the same roof, daily walks together, and evenings spent in each other's society, the intimacy between the vicar's daughter and the stranger sojourning in her father's house grew rapidly. The disparity of age between them offered no obstacle to the familiarity of their intercourse.

There are some men who accept the advance of age, and even make a step to meet it; there are others who painfully and eagerly fend it off; again, there are some who simply ignore it. To this latter category belonged Sir John Gale. You could not say that he indulged in any undue affectation of juvenility. He merely seemed to take it for granted that such affectation would have been entirely superfluous.

From the first moment of seeing Veronica he had been struck by her remarkable beauty. And not her least attraction in his eyes, was the contrast between her character and her position.

"Who the deuce would have dreamed of



finding such a girl as that in an English country parsonage!" he said to himself.

In their conversations together, Veronica had spoken of her mother's early life, and had not attempted to conceal her own longing to quit Shipley-in-the-Wold and Daneshire altogether, for other and brighter scenes. He had noted, with a sort of cynical good-humour, the girl's aspiration after wealth and display; her restless discontent with the obscurity of the vicarage; the love of admiration which it required no very acute penetration to discover in her. But these traits of character were by no means distasteful to Sir John. Coupled with a plain face, or an awkward manner, they would have—not disgusted, so much as—bored him. United to rare beauty, and a quick intelligence, they amused and attracted him. And then, to complete the spell, came that crowning charm without which all the rest would have wasted their sweetness on Sir John Gale; the fact that this young, brilliant, and beautiful girl, desired very unmistakably to be pleasing in his eyes.

If she be not fair for me,  
What care I how fair she be?

might have been said, and said truly, by the baronet, respecting the loveliest woman ever

cast in mortal mould. Time and self-indulgence, in proportion as they had indurated his heart, had rendered his egotism more and more keenly sensitive.

It gratified his egotism to be, from whatever cause, an object of attention to Veronica. He cared not to ask himself whether she would have lowered her beautiful eyes to regard him for an instant, had he been poor and obscure. His wealth and his rank were part of himself; inseparable from that Capital I, which filled up for him so large a space in God's universe.

"The girl would make a furore if she were known," he said to himself. "Her colouring, hair, and eyes, are perfect. And she has spirit enough for Lucifer!"

Nevertheless he had not gauged the height of Veronica's ambition. Day by day, and hour by hour, the attraction exercised over him by her beauty grew stronger.

"You are not such a votary of Mrs. Grundy as your friend," he said to her one day.

"As Maud?" answered Veronica, laughing. Then she continued, with a disdainful toss of her head, "No, truly; I suppose my Italian blood renders me incapable of worshipping at that shrine. Dio mio! Life is so short! And

so little sweet! Why embitter it voluntarily with Mrs. Grundy?"

"Yet in your heart—confess now—you are a little afraid of her?"

"I might answer you as you answered Maud: am I a pickpocket to be afraid of the policeman?"

"Miss Desmond's retort did not hit the case. The policeman merely *administers* laws: Mrs. Grundy makes them."

"She shall make none for me," said Veronica, looking very handsome in her scorn.

Sir John gazed upon her curiously; but he said no more at that time. The subject, however, seemed to have a peculiar attraction for him, and he returned to it frequently.

On the Friday morning preceding the Sunday fixed for Maud's return home, there came a letter to the vicar from his ward. The purport of it was, to ask his leave to stay a short time longer at Lowater House. There was to be a concert at Danecester, to which Mrs. Sheardown had promised to take her. At the end of the letter were a few words about Hugh Lockwood.

"Do you know, Uncle Charles," wrote Maud, "that Mr. Lockwood knows my Aunt Hilda? He heard accidentally that I was a

niece of Lady Tallis, and he then mentioned that he and his mother had made her acquaintance at a watering-place three or four years ago; and that Mrs. Lockwood and my aunt became quite intimate. They have not seen her for a long time; but she promised to let them know, whenever she came to London. I cannot have seen Aunt Hilda since I was seven years old, when she came one day to see poor mamma; yet my recollection of her is a correct one, for Mr. Lockwood describes her as a small slight woman with delicate features and beautiful eyes. This is just what I remember. Only he says she is now sadly faded."

"Dear me!" said the vicar, "odd enough that these Lockwoods should have come across Lady Tallis! Here is a postscript for you, Veronica, asking you to send back some dress or other by Captain Sheardown's man. See to it, will you?" Then the vicar, having handed his daughter the letter, went away to his study.

Veronica read the letter from beginning to end. She read it more than once. There was a good deal in it about that Hugh Lockwood, she thought. She remembered what Miss Begbie had said about him, and her lip curled.

*She* care for the attentions of such a one as Mr. Hugh Lockwood! Emma Begbie should change her tone some day. *Pazienza!*

Veronica got together the articles for which Maud had asked, and as she did so, she scarcely knew whether she were glad or sorry that Maud was going to remain a while longer at Lowater House.

“Dear old Maudie! I hope she will enjoy herself.” Then she wondered what Maud would say to her daily walk with Sir John Gale, and whether Maud would perceive the growing devotion of his manner towards herself. And then she looked in the glass with a triumphant smile. But in a moment the blood rushed up to her brow, and she turned away impatiently. Was she afraid in her secret heart, as Sir John had said? No: not afraid of the gossiping malice of the world: not afraid of Mrs. Grundy. But she had a latent dread of Maud’s judgment. Maud had such a lofty standard, such a pure ideal. Bah! People all wished to be happy; all strove and struggled for it. She, Veronica, was at least honest to herself. She did not gild her motives with any fine names. She longed to be happy in her own way, instead of pretending to be happy in other people’s way.

That very afternoon, Sir John Gale announced that Mr. Plew had told him he might quite safely venture to travel. He made the communication to Veronica as they stood side by side leaning over the low wall of St. Gildas's churchyard, and looking at the moss-grown graves, all velvety and mellow under the slanting rays of the declining sun.

"Mr. Plew was very hard and cruel," said Sir John in a low voice. "Very hard and inexorable. I tried to hint to him that my strength was not yet sufficiently recovered to render my taking a journey, a safe experiment. But it was in vain. Was he not cruel?"

Veronica stood still and silent, supporting her elbow on the low wall of the graveyard, and leaning her cheek on her hand.

"Was he not cruel, Veronica?"

His voice sank to a whisper as he uttered her name, and drawing nearer, he took the unoccupied hand that hung listlessly by her side.

Her heart beat quickly ; a hundred thoughts seemed to whirl confusedly through her brain. But she stood immovably steady, with her eyes still turned toward the green graveyard.

"I—I don't know. I suppose—I should

think not. You ought to be glad to be well enough to go away."

He drew yet nearer, and pressed the hand that lay passive in his clasp.

"You think it natural to be glad to leave Shipley?"

"Very natural."

"You hate this place and this life. I have seen how uncongenial all your surroundings are to you. You are like some bright tropical bird carried away from his native sunshine, and caged under a leaden sky. Leave it, and fly away into the sunshine!"

"That is easily said!"

"You are not angry?" he asked, eagerly, as she made a move to walk back towards the house.

"Why should I be angry? But the sun is sinking fast, and papa will expect me. We had better return to the house."

"Stay yet an instant! This may be our last walk together. What would papa do if you did not return home at all?"

"Really I do not see the use of discussing so absurd a hypothesis."

"Not at all absurd. It must happen some day."

"There is Catherine at the gate, looking for us. I must go back."

"Ah, Veronica, you *are* angry with me!"

"No."

"Then it is the shadow of Mrs. Grundy that has darkened your face. Why does she come between poor mortals and the sunshine?"

"Nonsense!"

"I told you that you were afraid of Mrs. Grundy in your heart."

"And I told *you* that you were mistaken."

They had been walking towards the house, side by side, but apart, and had by this time reached the little iron wicket which gave access to the lawn. Here Sir John paused, and said, softly: "Well, I have been obedient. I have come home; or rather, you came, and I followed. Perhaps there was no great merit in that. But, Veronica, if you are not angry that I have dared to call you so, give me a token of forgiveness."

"I have told you that I am not angry."

"Yes; but you say so with your face turned away. Not one look? See—that glove that you are pulling off—give me that."

"Pray, Sir John!" murmured Veronica, hurrying up the gravel path, "I request that you will not touch my hand. The servant is there, within sight."



"The glove, then! Fling it down as a gage of defiance to Mrs. Grundy, if you refuse to give it as a token of pardon to me!"

She ran past him quickly, up the steps and into the house.

As she entered it, a little brown glove fluttered in the air, and fell at the feet of Sir John Gale.

## CHAPTER XI.

## SIR JOHN IS DISCUSSED.

DURING the first four or five years of Maud Desmond's stay at Shipley, Lady Tallis had written several times to Mr. Levincourt, asking news of her niece, and pouring out tidings of her own troubles and injuries in long, tangled skeins of sentences, wherein verbs and their nominative cases were involved together in inextricable confusion. Moreover, as she wrote with very pale ink, on very thin paper, and crossed each page of writing, the trouble of deciphering her epistles speedily became a greater one than Mr. Levincourt was willing to give himself.

Her ladyship's mode of expressing herself was singularly enigmatical. This did not arise from any intention of being mysterious, but simply from what the vicar styled "puzzle-headedness," and from a conception of the

grammatical construction of the English language considerably at variance with the best authorities.

Lady Tallis invariably wrote of her husband as "he." This was intelligible until some other male individual requiring the same personal pronoun appeared in the letter. But when that other individual—whoever he might be—had to be mentioned, the difficulty of distinguishing the "he's" became considerable.

Add to this that every word which could be abbreviated was cut down to two or three letters: "which" became wh, "your" yr, "morning" mrg, and so forth. As though time and letter-paper were so inestimably precious to the writer that they must be economised at all hazards. Though, in truth she had quite as much both of the one and the other as she knew what to do with.

Mr. Levincourt would glance at the beginning and the end, and then would fold up the letter, saying to himself, as he placed it in his desk, that he would read it carefully "by-and-by."

As years went on the communications between Lady Tallis and the family at the vicarage grew rarer and rarer. Her ladyship

was travelling about. The town-house was let on a long lease. Her address was uncertain. It became more and more apparent—or would have become so, to any one taking the trouble to consider the poor lady's epistles with patience and sympathy—that her married life was wretched. She would, she said, very gladly have received her niece for a while, but "circumstances forbade her doing so." What those circumstances were, the vicar knew with tolerable accuracy.

Veronica, too, had learned from her mother more of Lady Tallis's history than was known to Maud. Mrs. Levincourt had often expressed her contempt for Lady Tallis's weakness in submitting to be crushed and tyrannised over by her husband, and had said that the woman must be an imbecile!

Veronica was inclined to think so too.

Occasionally Maud had spoken of her aunt to the vicar. "I should like to see Aunt Hilda," she had said. "She is the only one left of dear mamma's relatives. And I know mamma loved her very much."

Then the vicar had explained that although Mrs. Desmond loved her sister, she by no means loved or esteemed her sister's husband: and that there was no possibility of Maud's

desire to see her aunt being gratified, unless Lady Tallis should come to Shipley-in-the-Wold.

Once Maud had said a few words to Veronica on the subject.

"I can understand plainly," said she, "that poor Aunt Hilda is very harshly treated, and very much to be pitied. During dear mamma's lifetime, I was, of course, too mere a child to know anything about it. I remember once, Aunt Hilda came to see mamma; and she cried and talked very excitedly, and mamma sent me out of the room."

"I think," answered Veronica, "that Lady Tallis's history may be summed up in a few words. She was good-natured and weak. Her husband was bad-natured and strong. Ecco!"

"But I wonder why he does not love her! Aunt Hilda had beauty and gentle birth and a kind sweet nature."

"I believe, Maud, that men love what amuses them. Now it is possible to be handsome, and well-born, and good-natured, and yet to bore people to death."

When, during the first day of her stay at Lowater House, Maud discovered that Mr. Lockwood knew her aunt, she asked him many questions about her.

"I am unfortunately not able to tell you as much of Lady Tallis as my mother would be," answered Hugh Lockwood.

"Mrs. Lockwood and my aunt were quite intimate, were they not?"

"They lived in the same boarding-house at Torquay for some time. My mother was an invalid, and had been advised to go to Devonshire for the winter. Lady Tallis was there alone; so was my mother; and they found each other's society more congenial than that of the rest of the people in the house."

"And Aunt Hilda was quite alone?"

"Quite alone. At first we supposed her to be a widow; but after a short time she became very confidential with my mother, and explained that her husband was still living, but that—that—her marriage was not a fortunate or happy one. You must understand, Miss Desmond," proceeded Hugh, seeing Maud's countenance fall, and the colour flush into her cheek, "that Lady Tallis volunteered this statement. My mother, however, has a singular power of winning confidence. It has more than once happened to her to receive the most curious particulars of their private history from almost total strangers. I think that, if you knew her, you would not distrust her."

"I never distrust people," answered Maud,

looking up candidly into his face. Then a thought came into her mind, and she added hastily, "Not quite, *never*; of course I am bound in conscience to own that there are some faces, and especially some voices, which inspire me with distrust; perhaps unjustly."

She was sitting alone with her hostess next evening before dinner. The twilight still struggled with the blaze of the fire. It was that peaceful hour between day and night, when old people are apt to dream of the past, and young people of the future."

"Maud," said Mrs. Sheardown, "do you know when your guardian's guest is to take his departure?"

"Not certainly. As soon as he was well enough to travel, he said, when I left the vicarage. That is vague, of course. But I should think he might go by this time."

"That sounds a little like 'I wish he would go.'"

"Does it?"

"You don't like this Sir John Gale, Maud. Have you any reason for not liking him, or has *he* one of those faces or voices which inspire you with distrust? I'll make a confession, Maud. *I* have a strange distrust of this man, and with less excuse than you; for I have

never spoken to, nor ever seen him. It is one of what I call my presentiments, and what Tom calls my unreasonable feminine prejudices! I wish the man were fairly away out of the vicarage. Does Mr. Levincourt like him?"

"Very much. Uncle Charles finds him amusing, and able to talk upon subjects which my guardian seldom has an opportunity of discussing."

"And Miss Levincourt—does she like him too?"

"Oh—— Yes: I think so."

"That he admires her, is a matter of course. She is very handsome."

"Veronica has the most beautiful face I know."

"Yes, she is strikingly handsome. Our young friend, Hugh Lockwood, was quite captivated by her beauty the other evening."

"Yes."

"I warned him not to burn his wings, for I do not think a poor man would have much chance with Miss Levincourt."

"N—no—I don't know."

"I don't say that she would be deliberately mercenary—only—only I don't think she would happen to fall in love with a poor man."



"Dear Mrs. Sheardown, I always cite you as one of the most just persons I know. But—don't be angry with me—I do think you are a little unjust to Veronica."

"Am I? I will try not to be, Maudie."

"It would seem presumptuous in me to talk to you in this way, only that I, of course, know Veronica so thoroughly. She has fine qualities; indeed she has."

"She has, at all events, one good quality, which I am willing to admit; she is fond of you, I truly believe."

"Indeed she is, Mrs. Sheardown. And you don't know how I try her. I lecture her and scold her sometimes, terribly. And you know I am two years younger than she is. And yet she bears it all so well. I am sure that if Veronica loved only flatterers she would detest me."

"Who is it that does not detest Miss Desmond?" demanded Captain Sheardown, entering the room at this moment with Mr. Hugh Lockwood.

"Never mind," returned his wife; "the reference you heard on coming in concerned neither you nor Mr. Lockwood."

"We have been to Shipley-in-the-Wold, Nelly."

"What took you to Shipley-in-the-Wold?"

"Captain Sheardown was kind enough to go, partly on my account," said Hugh. "I wanted to have a look at the church there; and as we are to go to Danecester for the Sunday service at the cathedral, I thought I might not have another opportunity of seeing St. Gildas, which is curious, and very complete in its way."

"Had I known we were going to Shipley, Miss Desmond," said the captain, "I should have asked if you had any commands to give me. But we only made up our minds to push on when we were already a good mile on the road. This young gentleman found my description of St. Gildas's church irresistibly attractive. He was rather disappointed when I told him I was going to call at the vicarage. But he consoled himself with the hope that Miss Levincourt might not be at home."

"I assure you, Mrs. Sheardown," said Hugh, turning to his hostess with a vehement earnestness that made her smile: "I assure you that I did not even know, until we were within sight of the vicarage house, that Miss Levincourt lived there! If I had been told, I had forgotten."

"Did you see Uncle Charles?" asked Maud of Captain Sheardown.

"No; there was no one at home. The

vicar was at Haymoor on parish business, and Miss Levincourt was out walking."

"Then," continued Maud, "you did not see Veronica?"

"Stop a bit! We had left our cards at the vicarage, and had walked to St. Gildas, and thoroughly inspected that very squat specimen of Saxon architecture—oh yes, I dare say it isn't Saxon at all, Hugh, but never mind!—Miss Desmond does not know any better!—and we were crossing the churchyard, when whom should we see but Miss Levincourt and Sir—Sir—what is the man's name?"

"Sir John Gale," said his wife, gravely.

"Of course! Sir John Gale! Hugh saw them first."

"Miss Levincourt wore a red cloak, and the colour caught my eye," Hugh explained.

"Something caught your eye? Yes, and fixed it, moreover! For it was your intense gaze that made me look in the direction of the common. And there I saw Miss Levincourt and Sir Thingumbob strolling along arm-in-arm."

"The dressing-bell has rung, Tom," said Mrs. Sheardown, rising from her chair.

"All right, Nelly. But I was surprised to see such a young-looking man! I fancied he was quite an old fogey!"

"No," said Maud; "he is not what one would call an old fogey. Did Veronica see you, Captain Sheardown?"

"We walked half across the common to have the honour of accosting Miss Levincourt. Hugh sacrificed his inclination to a sense of politeness. Miss Veronica received us very graciously, wanted us to go back to the vicarage; but Sir John looked uncommonly black. I don't think he half liked being interrupted in his tête-à-tête. And upon my word——"

"*Please* go and dress, Tom," interrupted Mrs. Sheardown. And you, too, Mr. Lockwood. You will both be late as it is."

While the captain was finishing his toilet, his wife came into his dressing-room, and said, "Oh you blundering, tiresome Tom!"

"What have I done now?" asked Captain Sheardown, wheeling round with a huge hair-brush in each hand.

"I didn't want you to talk about that man before Maud."

"What man?"

"That Sir John Gale."

"Why upon earth shouldn't I?"

"Well, it does not so much matter your speaking about him, as coupling his name with Veronica's. It makes Maud uneasy. I always knew Veronica to be a flirt; but, upon my

word, I think her conduct with this man passes all limits. What is the vicar about? He knows nothing whatever of this man with whom he lets his daughter wander about the country."

"Gently, Nelly! They were not wandering about the country. They were taking an afternoon stroll within sight of her father's house."

"It's all the same!"

"Not quite, my dear."

"Tom, would you like your daughter to do so?"

"My dear Nelly, if you are speaking seriously——"

"Quite seriously."

"Then, seriously, I think you are making a mountain of a molehill. The man is not a pleasant-looking fellow, though I suppose he is handsome after a fashion. Neither was he particularly civil in his manner. I dare say he thinks himself a very magnificent three-tailed bashaw. But, after all, neither his looks nor his manners constitute a crime. And if the vicar and his daughter are satisfied, I don't think we have any business to object."

"Why should Sir John Gale linger at

Shipley? He is quite well enough to travel. Maud was saying——”

“Oh, it is Maud who has been putting this into your head?”

“No. But she distrusts and dislikes the man. I am not fond of Veronica Levincourt, but I cannot help feeling that I ought to hold out a hand of womanly help to her—ought to give her a word of counsel. The girl is motherless, and in spite of all her self-confidence, we must remember that she is but nineteen. I wish I had invited her here with Maud! But, to say the truth, I was afraid of Hugh Lockwood getting entangled by her. He was greatly taken with her beauty. And her love of admiration would lead her to encourage him without the smallest compunction.”

“Well, my dear child,” said the captain, “this Sir John Gale will be gone in a few days and——”

“Is he going?”

“Yes, to be sure! Oh I forgot to tell you. His man—a little foreign fellow, who opened the door to us at the vicarage—said that his master would be leaving Shipley at the end of the week.”

“Oh how relieved and glad I am! You

stupid boy, not to tell me that, the very first thing!"

"So you see, you need not attempt the very disagreeable duty of giving a word of counsel to Miss Levincourt."

"Disagreeable enough! And ten to one I should have done no good by it. Well, Sir John is going, and it is all smooth. Maud will be delighted to get rid of him."

"I cannot understand why you two should take such a hatred to the man though! As for you, Mrs. Nelly, you know simply nothing whatever about him. He may be a model of manly virtue for anything you can tell."

"I hardly think that a boon companion of Lord George Segrave's is likely to be that! But I am willing to allow him every virtue under the sun if he will only relieve Shipley vicarage of his presence."

"There's the dinner-bell. Come along, you illogical, prejudiced, unreasonable—dear little woman!"

## CHAPTER XII.

## THE VICAR IS NOT ALARMED.

RAIN, rain, rain! It poured down on the open roads. It plashed and dripped from gutter and gargoyle. It sank deep into the miry uplands, and covered the marsh-rushes on the wide flats with beaded pearls. The sun went down amid clouds that looked like dun smoke reddened by the reflex of a distant conflagration.

Splash, splash from the slated eaves came the water-drops on to the evergreens outside the sitting-room window at Shipley vicarage. Splash, splash, splash!"

The log hissed in the chimney. They always crowned their coal fire with a log of wood at the vicarage of an evening. It was a custom which Stella Levincourt had brought with her from foreign parts. She said she liked the smell of the wood.



Not that the pungent, acrid odour was grateful in her nostrils; not that the blue flame leaped brighter than the deep glow from the steady coal; no; not for these reasons did the economical housewife (who had learned to cherish a sixpence with the lingering grip that had been wont to caress her Tuscan paul) insist on the extravagance of a log of wood upon the evening fire.

It was the memory of her youth that she loved, and to which she offered this burnt-sacrifice. Phantoms of old days revisited her in the pale grey smoke that curled up on her hearth-stone, like the smoke of the Tuscan fires, far away.

And the custom survived her. It was continued on the same ostensible ground as that on which she had commenced it. The vicar "liked the smell of the wood." Veronica "thought the bright flame so much prettier than the nasty coal-gas that flared, and glared, and scorched one."

The vicar of Shipley-in-the-Wold sat alone by his hearth. He was depressed, and a little out of humour. His guest had left him, and the vicar missed his evening chat.

Maud was still at Lowater, and Veronica had gone to pay a long-promised visit to old Mrs. Plew, the surgeon's mother.

"Mrs. Plew has asked me to drink tea with her so often," Veronica had said. "I ought to go. I will walk over there after the afternoon practice in the school-room."

The vicar had made no opposition at the time. But, now that he was alone, he began to think himself hardly used. Veronica could stay at home, evening after evening, while there was a stranger in the house. But she cared nothing for her father's society. She never considered that he might feel solitary. She had declared herself to be moped to death, and so had gone out to seek a change. Selfish, selfish! How selfish and inconsiderate people were!

Splash, splash, splash, fell the drops from the slates of the roof. On the garden the spring rain was falling, fine and close. Now and again came the west wind, flying fast, and with a swoop of his wings scattered the trembling drops, and dashed them against the window-panes.

Each time that the vicar heard the rain pattering against the glass he looked up from his book and moved uneasily in his chair. Sometimes he stirred the fire. Sometimes he moved his reading-lamp. Once he rose, went to the window, drew back the curtains, and

put his face close to the glass. There was not much to be seen. As his eyes got used to the darkness he could distinguish the outline of the old yew-tree, solidly black, against the vague, shadow-like clouds. A wet stormy night! How would Veronica get home? Joe Dowsett had gone to Shipley Magna to buy corn, or the vicar would have made him take a mackintosh and waterproof shoes to his young mistress. He could not send either of the women out in this weather. Then he sighed, and went back to his chair and his book.

In the kitchen old Joanna was knitting a coarse grey stocking, feeling rather than seeing her work, and Catherine, with the solitary candle drawn close to her, was trimming a smart cap.

"How solitary-like the house seems now!" exclaimed the latter, after having plied her needle for some time in silence.

"Quiet," responded Joanna, briefly.

"Oh, quiet enough! But for that matter it warn't never noisy. I like a little life in a place. Somehow, Sir John being here, and Paul, livened us up a bit."

"You've a queer notion of liveliness, Catherine. It was more like deadliness a deal for

one while! And very nigh *being* deadliness too." The old woman nodded her head in grim satisfaction at her joke.

"Well, but there was something going on all the time. Not but what Paul gave us little enough of his company: and as for Sir John, I didn't hardly set eyes on him from week's end to week's end."

"No great loss neither!"

"Laws, Joanna, why are you so set agin' Sir John? I'm sure he was quite a handsome-looking gentleman for his time of life. And behaved handsome, too, when he went away."

"*My* liking ain't to be bought with guineas. Nor yet with five-pound notes."

"Well," observed Catherine, reflectively, "I think guineas helps liking. I hate stingy folks."

"You're young and foolish. It's a pity as wisdom and judgment mostly comes when folks hasn't no more need on 'em."

There was another and a longer silence, during which the wind rose higher, and the rain rattled against the casement.

"We shall have Miss Maud back to-morrow, I suppose," said Catherine. "She's a nice young lady: only a bit high. I don't mean high exactly, neither: but—she has a kind of

way of keeping you at a distance somehow. Miss Veronica's more to my taste."

"H'm!" grunted out old Joanna, with closed lips.

"She's a bit overbearing sometimes," pursued Catherine. "But then she has such pleasant ways with her when she is in a good humour."

"Did ye ever remember Miss Veronica taking any trouble about you? I don't mean *telling somebody else to take trouble* and her getting the credit of being very kind and generous for it! But right-down putting of herself out of the way for you quietly, where there was no show-off in the matter? Because I've know'd her ever since she was born, and *I can't call such a thing to mind.*"

Catherine opined under her breath that Joanna was "crusty" to-night.

The old woman's ears were quick enough to catch the words, and she answered, emphatically, "No, Catherine; you're mistaken. It ain't crustiness as makes me speak as I spoke then. But I'm nigh upon fifty year longer in the world than you. And I've seen a deal of people, high and low. I'd do more for that young lass than you would. But, all the same, I read her as plain as print. I tell you, it makes me sorry to see her sometimes."

"Sorry! What for?"

"What for? Well, there's no need to say whether it's for this or for that; but I am sorry to see a young creature with no more religion than a heathen—Lord forgive me!—and her head turned with vanity and vain-glory, and caring for nothing but show-off and being admired. I tell you, if Miss Veronica was sent to live among black Indians, she'd paint herself blacker than any of 'em, if that was what they considered handsome. Ah, deary me, Catherine, child! don't get to think too much of that rosy face of yours. It is pretty now. You needn't plume yourself up. God made it, and he didn't make it to last very long."

"There's the door-bell!" said Catherine, jumping up, not unwilling to escape from Joanna's moralising.

In a few minutes the hall-door was shut heavily, and almost immediately afterwards the vicar rang his bell.

"Was that Miss Veronica?" he asked, as the girl entered the room.

"No, sir; it was Jemmy Sack, sir. He brought a message from my young lady to say as she wouldn't be home to-night."

"Not be home to-night!"

"No, sir. Jemmy Sack saw Miss Veronica

at the school-house, and she bade him say, as it threatened rain, she should very likely stay at Mrs. Plew's for the night. And you wasn't to be alarmed, please, sir."

"Alarmed! No, of course I am not alarmed. But—Where is Jemmy? Is he gone?"

"Yes, sir; he's gone. He wouldn't hardly stay long enough to give his message. He was running down with rain."

"Ha! It is raining still, then, is it?"

"Pouring, sir. And the wind beats the rain against your face so as I couldn't hardly shut the door."

"Let me know when Joe Dowsett comes back."

"Yes, sir."

"What o'clock is it?"

"After eight. I looked at the kitchen clock just afore I came up-stairs."

When Catherine related to her fellow-servant what had passed, the old woman shook her head.

"Ah," said she, "that's the way. The strange face is gone. There's nobody at home to amuse my lady, so off she goes to make a fool of that soft-hearted little surgeon, that would just lay down and let her walk over him, if she had a mind to."

"But, Joanna, it's a real bad night. I don't wonder as she didn't like the walk home, all along that sloppy lane, or through the churchyard, as is worse a deal, and lonesomer."

"It ain't sloppiness, nor yet churchyards that could keep Miss Veronica if she wanted to come. And, what's more, if Miss Maud had been at home she wouldn't have stayed at old Mrs. Plew's. For Miss Maud she do take her up pretty short about her goings on with that soft little man. If there's anybody on God's earth as Veronica minds, or looks up to, it's Miss Desmond. And I've wished more than once lately that Miss Maud hadn't been away this fortnight."

"Why?" asked Catherine, gazing with open-mouthed curiosity at Joanna.

"Well, it's no matter. I may ha' been wrong, or I may ha' been right; but all's well that ends well, as the saying goes."

And with this oracular response Catherine was fain to content herself.



## CHAPTER XIII.

## JOE DOWSETT'S NEWS.

It was not far from ten o'clock when Joe Dowsett returned from Shipley Magna. Joe was in some respects an excellent servant, but he had his failings—among which might be reckoned an inability to resist strong liquor when proffered gratuitously. During twenty years Joe had not been known to be drunk at his own expense. But a visit to the Crown at Shipley Magna, where he was an old crony and customer of the head ostler, was pretty sure to result in Joe's partial intoxication.

On the present occasion he had ridden to Shipley and back on the old pony, the sole beast of burthen belonging to the vicar. And Joe attributed the enormous amount of time occupied in the journey, to his own remarkable humanity to the pony.

"Mustn't press him hard, the old beast,"

said Joe, on his return, standing before the kitchen fire, the heat of which caused his wet clothes to steam again.

"No fear of *you* pressing him hard to come away from the Crown," retorted Joanna. "I advise you to get to your bed, and take off them damp things. Else you'll be getting a fever, or the rheumaticks, or something. Only," she added, under her breath, "only we know there's a special providence for certain folks; and I'm sure you're one on 'em this night, Joe Dowsett."

"All right, Jo-anna. I feel pretty comfortable, thankee. No, no; mustn't press the old pony. The merciful man is merciful to his beast."

At this moment Catherine came back from the sitting-room, whither she had been, according to orders, to give her master the tidings of Joe's return.

"Master's fine and vexed," she said, "at Joe being so late. He said he wanted to send Joe to fetch home Miss Veronica if he had come at any reasonable hour. But now it's too late."

"Why was he unwilling to let her stay at Mrs. Plew's?" asked Joanna.

"Oh, I don't know. Miss Veronica has

stayed there before. But the vicar said, as he'd have gone to fetch her hisself, only it's such a night, and been getting worse and worse since sundown. I think master feels lonely after being used to Sir John's company. And then both the young ladies being away the first evening and all—it's made him cross. He says he shall go to bed, and you're to send him up a slice of dry toast and a glass of negus, with not too much nutmeg in it."

"Negus ain't a bad thing," observed Joe Dowsett.

"You go to your bed, Joe, for mercy's sake!" cried the old woman, impatiently. "Don't stand a-steaming there like a copper on a washing-day."

"I feel pretty comfortable, Jo-anna. I see a friend of yours at the Crown this evening—Mr. Paul."

"Paul at the Crown!" exclaimed Catherine.

"Yes, Paul at the Crown. He pretended not to see me, and skulked through the tap-room like a rat. Sir John's a gentleman. I say nothing against Sir John. But Paul—Paul's a sneak."

"Don't you talk nonsense. Paul never did you no harm," said Joanna. "And I don't believe you saw him at all to-night."

"You don't believe——?"

"No, I don't. Him and his master was to sleep at Danecester last night, and go off by an early train this morning. It ain't likely as Paul should be at the Crown at Shipley Magna all alone. You must have took somebody else for him. Paul would have spoke to you, if it had have been him. Why shouldn't he?"

Joe turned on her with crushing severity.

"Perhaps you'll say I was drunk next, Joanna!"

"O Lord no, *I* shan't say so. Maybe you were dreaming. But never mind now. Go to bed, there's a good man."

It proved very difficult indeed to induce Joe to go to bed, however. He protested over and over again that he felt pretty comfortable. Then he required Joanna and Catherine to declare solemnly that they believed his statement about having seen Paul: which, finding it hopeless to get him to go to bed on any other terms, they unscrupulously did. Then he very unexpectedly declared that he and Paul had lived together like brothers; that there was no one for whom he felt a warmer regard; and that Paul's cold and unkind behaviour had cut him to the heart. At last, by dint of

scolding and coaxing, he was got to his own room; the door of which Joanna shut, with a fervent prayer that they might not all be burnt in their beds, and with a gleam of comfort in the knowledge that the end of candle entrusted to Joe could not last above five minutes.

"Ain't it queer, Joe taking that notion about seeing Paul?" said Catherine, when she and Joanna were alone together. "Do you think it could ha' been—could ha' been—what's that you call it when a person's ghost walks before they're dead, as a kind of warning. Like that story you tell of the eldest son where you lived kitchen-maid long ago? Oh, I know—a fetch. That's the name. Do you think it could ha' been Paul's fetch?"

"Pooh, child! Servants don't have no fetches. Them kind of things only belongs to great families. Don't you go scaring your wits with such fancies, or I shall never tell you no more of my stories."

"But," persisted the girl, "Joe said that the figure passed through the room very quick and silent, and with its head turned away, and——"

"Well, if its head was turned away, how was Joe to know who it was? It's just a

drunken man's fancy, I tell you. Go to your bed. It's nigh upon eleven, and I have seen to the fastenings of the doors. Good-night. When Joe's sober to-morrow, he will tell another story, I warrant."

But the next morning Joe told no other story. On the contrary, he persisted in his former assertion, and confirmed it by proof, which it was impossible to doubt. He had remarked Paul's presence at the Crown to his friend the head ostler, and the ostler had said, yes; he knew him well enough. He was the foreign servant of that rich barrowknight, as owned such neat nags, and had put up at the Crown for his hunting quarters. But in reply to a question as to what Paul had come there for, the ostler professed ignorance. It might be to fetch some traps of his master's. The ostler believed that there had been a pork-manty or something of that kind left in the landlord's care. Paul had brought a fly from the hotel at Danecester, and was to go back in it. So he (the ostler) supposed that he had to carry luggage.

"But why Paul shouldn't speak to me I don't know, nor I don't much care," said Joe Dowsett, whose feelings towards his dear friend had come down to their ordinary level

of stolid indifference, since the influence of his potations had subsided.

"I couldn't have believed as Paul would have give hisself such airs," exclaimed Catherine, with a toss of her head. She felt that Paul's slight of Joe Dowsett was a reflection on the rest of the vicar's household.

About eleven o'clock in the forenoon Maud arrived from Lowater. Captain Sheardown had driven her to Shipley, and had set her down at the vicarage without alighting himself, purposing to proceed to Haymoor.

"Where is Veronica?" was Maud's first question to her guardian.

"Veronica has displeased me very much," answered the vicar. "She went to drink tea with old Mrs. Plew, and chose to remain there all night, although she knows—or might know if she had any sort of filial desire to ascertain my sentiments on any subject whatever—that I object to putting herself under any obligation of that kind to the Plews."

Maud looked grave, but said sweetly, "Please don't be very angry with her, Uncle Charles. It was a dreadfully stormy night. Perhaps she was afraid of the walk home."

"She was assuredly not afraid of incurring my displeasure, whatever else she may have feared," said the vicar.

Maud made no further direct efforts to avert her guardian's wrath ; but she took the most effectual means of putting him into a good humour, by gaily chatting about all the little incidents of her visit to Lowater, the concert at Danecester, and the people who had been to the house.

She was in the midst of her talk, sitting, still with her hat in her hand, in the vicar's study, when the door of the room was opened a very little way, and a voice cried: "Miss Maud, Miss Maud! Would ye please step here a moment?"

The voice was old Joanna's; but so strange and muffled in its tone, that an unreasoning apprehension of impending evil fell upon Maud's heart.

She sprang up, and, forcing a smile, said: "Uncle Charles, I must go for an instant to say a word to Joanna. I'll be back as soon as possible. The dear old woman has some mighty mystery on hand."

She closed the study door with an instinctive care, for which she could never afterwards account, and faced a countenance which seemed, like Medusa's fabled head, to turn her into stone.

The countenance was Joanna's. But so



changed, ghastly, and aged was it that Maud would hardly, under other circumstances, have recognised the familiar features.

"What is the matter, Joanna?" she asked, in quick low tones, whose firmness surprised herself.

"My dear Maudie," answered the trembling old woman, "my sweet young lady, don't ye lose *your* head. It's all we've got to depend on! I feel my years now, as I never felt 'em before."

Maud made a silent, eloquent gesture of impatience.

"Yes, I will speak, deary. Mr.—Mr. Plew's here. He looked in by—by—chance like. And—O Lord be merciful to us, and spare us!—he says, Miss Veronica is not at his mother's, and what's more, hasn't been there all night. And what to do, or what to say, or what will become of the vicar, I don't know!"

"Hush! Where is Mr. Plew? Take me to him. There is some mistake, some misunderstanding. No harm can have happened to Veronica, here, in her own home, amongst her own people! It is impossible!"

"O my deary, Mr. Plew is more like a mad creature than anything else. And as to

harm—— My innocent young lady, it goes to my heart to hurt you, but I'm afraid—I'm sore afraid——”

“Of what?”

The old woman made no answer, but moaned and wrung her hands.

A dreadful apprehension took hold of Maud that Mr. Plew had brought some fatal and decisive tidings; that Veronica was dead, and that the old servant was endeavouring to break the news to her. Collecting her senses as well as she could, she bade Joanna take her to Mr. Plew at once, and let her know the worst.

Joanna pointed to the door of the dining-parlour, and Maud sprang into the room.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## FLED.

JOANNA had not much exaggerated in saying that Mr. Plew was "more like a madman than anything else." He did seem to have nearly lost his senses.

"O, Miss Desmond!" he cried, as soon as he caught sight of Maud, and then stood dumb with clasped hands.

"Please to tell me at once. It will be kinder, indeed it will! Is she dead?"

The utterance of the word seemed to force a gush of tears from Maud's eyes, but she struggled hard to command herself.

The little surgeon recovered some spark of manhood and courage, at sight of the young girl's piteous, innocent face. His professional helpfulness came to his aid, and took him away from the contemplation of his own distress.

"Don't try too violently to force back your tears," he said. "Let them come. You will not let them master you. No; I do not think Veronica is dead. No, on my honour. I would not deceive you!"

"What is it then? Is she ill? Has there been any accident? Is she in danger?"

"I wish to Heaven, Miss Desmond, that I could answer your questions. All I know is, that Miss Levincourt did not sleep at my mother's house last night—did not even go there at all—and yet she sent word here by the boy that she meant to do so."

"But the boy may have mistaken her message. She may have said that she was going elsewhere. Have you asked? Have you inquired in the village? Joanna's face and—and yours have infected me with terror. But I cannot—I *cannot*—believe that there is any real ground for alarm."

"Alarm!" echoed the voice of Mr. Levincourt, and the next instant he stood in the room.

Any attempt at concealment was out of the question. A glance at the faces of Maud and Mr. Plew sufficed to show the vicar that some terrible misfortune had happened.

"Dear Uncle Charles," said Maud, taking

his hand, "Mr. Plew has told us that Veronica was not at his mother's house last night. Don't, pray don't, give way to terror, dear Uncle Charles. It has been some mistake of Jemmy Sack. I am sure, quite sure of it. What harm *can* have happened? We should have been sure to hear of any accident, you know. Ill news always travels quickly. We were startled, at first, but now I am coming to my senses a little, and I see how foolish it was to be so frightened!"

The poor child was trembling in every limb, and the hand with which she clasped the vicar's was as cold as marble.

Some men in Mr. Levincourt's case would have rushed instantly forth; would have sought here and there; would have inquired feverishly; would, in brief, have been spurred by their anxiety into immediate energy and action.

But the vicar was at first stunned, not stimulated, by the blow. He sank down in a chair like one whose bodily powers had been suddenly paralysed.

"The first thing to be done," said Maud, "is to send Joe into the village. Let him go to Sack's farm and try to find Jemmy. Then he might go or send to the Meggitts. It is

possible that Veronica may have gone there. Miss Turtle and the girls were always asking her. And you will make inquiries, won't you, Mr. Plew? I see more and more, how foolish it was to be so frightened!"

The vicar, as he recovered from the first shock and as Maud's elastic courage and young hopefulness rose higher and higher, and began to chase away the first ghastly fear that had crushed him, displayed an unexpected phase of feeling: he grew angry. He resented the pain he had been made to suffer.

"I think, Mr. Plew," he said, in a voice whose trembling tones were by no means under control, "I must say that I think it highly inconsiderate on your part to come here and cause so very terrible—so unspeakably terrible—an alarm, without having better grounds for it."

The little man, who seemed to be entirely uninfluenced by Maud's cheering suggestions, stood silent, and cast an appealing glance at the young girl.

"Law dear, sir!" cried old Joanna, who had remained in the room, "don't ye say that! Mr. Plew came here without knowing a thing about Miss Veronica. He was took aback and scared well-nigh as much as you

was, when I opened the door and asked him where she was, and why she hadn't come home with him."

"Is Joe gone? Is he going?" exclaimed the vicar, rising from his chair, and speaking now with nervous rapidity. "Why does no one exert any energy? I shall go in one direction myself—Joe must take another—to Sack's farm—d'ye hear? And, Plew, you will—you will search——" Then a sudden terror overcame him, and he fell back into the chair again with a groan. "My child! my child!" he cried. "Oh, my child! At this moment she may be—dead!"

"No, no, no—not that!" exclaimed Mr. Plew, eagerly. "Not that! I do not believe she is dead. I do not believe she is hurt. That is not what I fear."

"Then, sir, what is it you do fear? It is not this, and it is not that! What means have you of knowing? And how should you understand a parent's natural apprehensions, or undertake to limit them? Have you," he added, suddenly, having caught a glance of intelligence that passed between the surgeon and Joanna: "have you any information that you are concealing from me?"

"No! No!"

"You have! I see it in your face—and in hers. Joanna, I insist, I command, you to speak! Plew, if you think it kind to keep me in suspense, you are cruelly mistaken. Tell me the truth!"

"Mr. Levincourt, as God is my witness, I know nothing! I do not, upon my soul! But I—I had a momentary fear—a mere momentary suspicion—that——"

"*Suspicion, sir!*"

"That—that Miss Levincourt might have left her home, purposing not to return to it."

"H—how *dare* you?" gasped the vicar; and then suddenly ceased, as though the words were arrested in his throat and were almost choking him.

"Untie his neckcloth!" cried the surgeon, springing forward. The vicar waved him off, but suffered old Joanna to obey Mr. Plew's directions.

Maud looked from one to another in an agony of bewilderment.

"Left her home!" she exclaimed. "Veronica leave her home, purposing not to return to it! How? Why?"

"Whisht, my deary!" muttered Joanna, still busied about her master. "Don't ye



give way. It may not be so bad as we're afeard."

"So bad as what? What does Mr. Plew mean? What are you all afraid of? Oh, Veronica!"

"Here he is, sir! Here's Jemmy!" cried Joe Dowsett, dragging Jemmy Sack into the room after him. "I was on my way to the farm when I met him. Now speak, you young rascal, and tell his reverence what Miss Veronica said to you!"

The boy was flushed, panting, and very much frightened. Joe had expended a great part of his own painful excitement in haling Jemmy Sack to the vicarage with very unnecessary violence.

"I bain't a young rascal!" said Jemmy, driven to bay. "And I told the message here last night as Miss Veroniky said, so I did."

"Don't be afraid, Jemmy," said Maud, trying to soothe the boy. "No one will hurt you. You have done no harm."

"No, I knows I haven't!" retorted Jemmy.

"But you will tell us what—what Miss Veronica said, won't you, Jemmy? We are all in sad trouble because we're afraid some harm has happened to her, and we want to find out where she is."

The sight of the sweet, pale face, down which the tears were now streaming fast, and the sound of the sweet, tremulous voice, instantly melted the boy's heart, and he professed his readiness to say all that he knew. But that amounted to very little. He had seen Miss Veronica at the school-house. But she had not remained until the end of the practising. Before leaving, she had said to Jemmy that she was going to Mrs. Plew's house to drink tea, and that, as the evening was turning out wet, she should sleep there. Jemmy was to go and take that message to the vicarage. But he was not to go until quite late; not until after seven o'clock at all events. And Miss Veronica had given him a silver sixpence, and bade him earn it honestly by doing exactly as she told him.

"And so I did," protested Jemmy. "I niver goed near the vicarage until nigh upon eight o'clock, and it was powering wi' rain, and I was soaked through, and when I got home, daddy thrashed me."

Old Joanna stood by, emphasising every word that the boy uttered, by a nod of the head, a sigh, or a gesture with uplifted hands; as who should say, "Aye, aye! It is just as I thought!" Ever since the speaking of those words by Mr. Plew, which so aroused the

vicar's indignation, the latter had sat passive—almost sullen—in his chair. He had listened to Jemmy Sack's story in silence, and had apparently relinquished his purpose of going forth to seek his daughter. Now he rose, as though struck by a sudden idea, and hastily left the room. His footsteps were heard ascending the staircase, and entering the apartment overhead. It was Veronica's chamber. The steps ceased, and there was silence in the house. The little group in the dining parlour stood staring blankly at each other.

Maud's tears had ceased to flow. She was frozen by a new, and but half-comprehended fear.

Presently Catherine ran in from the kitchen. People had come to give what information they could. By this time the whole village was acquainted with Veronica's disappearance. Roger the ploughman's wife had seen Miss Levincourt by herself, walking along the Shipley Magna road very fast. Miss had not said good afternoon to her. But she (Roger's wife) thought she might not have seen her, for she was going along in a quick, scared kind of a way, looking straight before her.

Immediately after this woman, appeared a witness who testified to having seen the vicar's daughter in a carriage, driving swiftly on the road between Shipley Magna and Danecester, between five and six o'clock on the previous evening.

This man was the Shipley-in-the-Wold and Danecester carrier, who knew Veronica well by sight, as he did most people within a circuit of twenty miles round Shipley. He had just heard, he said, down at the Red Cow, that the young lady was missing. So he thought he would step up and say when and where he had last seen her.

On hearing the first words of this man's story, Maud had rushed breathlessly up-stairs to call her guardian. In a few minutes she returned alone to the door of the dining-room, and beckoned Mr. Plew to come to her.

The babble of voices, which had arisen high and confused when she had left the room, ceased suddenly as soon as her white face was seen again in the doorway. There was a pause of expectation.

"What is it?" whispered Mr. Plew, obeying Maud's summons.

"Will you please step into the study to Uncle Charles for a moment, Mr. Plew?"

She preceded him into the study. The vicar was sitting there with a paper in his hand.

"Is there news?" cried Mr. Plew, eagerly.

The vicar's face showed a strange agitation: an agitation different from the first emotions of surprise and alarm which he had exhibited on learning that his daughter was not to be found.

"Yes," he said; "there is news. I am—happy—thankful—that Veronica is in safety. It has been a false alarm—a—a mistake. I am quite relieved."

"Thank God!" cried the surgeon, fervently.

Mr. Levincourt tried to speak with some degree of self-control. His hand shook, and his features twitched.

"I have cause to be thankful," he began, and then suddenly broke down and turned away. "Tell him what I wanted, Maud," he murmured, in a stifled voice. Then he bent his arms on the table, and bowed his head, and hid his face in his hands.

"Will you do us the great kindness," said Maud, addressing the surgeon, "to get rid of all those people? Thank them, and say—what is fitting."

"But what am I to say?"

Maud glanced at the vicar, but seeing him motionless, with his face buried in his hands, she answered :

“Mr. Levincourt wishes them to be told that Veronica is in perfect safety. There is no cause for alarm. He has found a letter from her.”

“Impress upon them,” murmured the vicar, with still averted face, “that there has been a—misunderstanding. If I had seen the letter sooner——Miss Levincourt did not leave my house without informing me.”

Mr. Plew, still hesitating, Maud made an imploring gesture.

“Pray, pray, Mr. Plew, send those people away !”

Mr. Plew proceeded to obey the vicar's directions as well as he could. The poor little man's heart was aching and his spirit was troubled. At length he succeeded in inducing the little crowd to depart. They went unwillingly, and with a perfect hunger of unsatisfied curiosity. They would fain have lingered in the kitchen to talk and to hear, but old Joanna very unceremoniously bade them begone, and was obdurate towards all attempts at discussing the question of Miss Veronica's departure.

"I know no more than my betters chooses to tell me," said Joanna. "Thank God the lass isn't murdered, nor any way hurt, nor yet drowned, nor yet kidnapped. That's all I know. And her father knows where she is. And so I don't see as the rest is any of our businesses."

"Mr. Plew," said the vicar, when the surgeon, having knocked at the door of the study, had been re-admitted by Maud: "Mr. Plew, if I showed undue resentment for what you said just now, I ask your pardon."

"Oh, Mr. Levincourt! Don't, pray don't speak of my pardon! But—Miss Desmond said you had found a letter——"

"I have found a letter from my daughter, and I am going to London to-night."

"To-night!"

"Yes."

"To meet Miss Levincourt?"

"To meet Miss Levincourt if possible. I take Maud with me. I may be absent some time, and she cannot remain here alone. I shall place her under the protection of her aunt, Lady Tallis, who is in London. If you are asked about Miss Desmond, I wish you to be able to say that *she*, at least, is in safety."

There was a bitterness in the vicar's tone as

he spoke the last words, which sent a pang through the surgeon's heart. He was, as Joanna had called him, "a soft little man."

"I hope," said he, wistfully, "that I may be able to say so of Ve—of Miss Levincourt too."

"Mr. Plew, I believe you are a sincere friend, and that you wish well to us all," said the vicar, suddenly. "I will trust you."

"You may, Mr. Levincourt. I—of course I knew all along that it was of no use; and I never—scarcely ever—allowed myself to feel anything like hope. She was so superior in every way. But I am not altogether selfish. Veronica's happiness is very dear to me. It's all over now, of course. But if—if there is anything in the world I can do for you, or for her, you may be sure I shall not flinch."

The vicar took the little man's hand. "Ah!" he moaned, with the cruel candour of a man absorbed in his own trouble: "it might have been better if she had been able to bring herself to care for you. Anything would have been better than this! She has run away, Mr. Plew;—run away with that——" he checked himself, "with Sir John Gale."

"I knew it!" cried the surgeon. "I am



not surprised." But his face grew deadly pale as he spoke.

"Let it turn out as it may," resumed the vicar, "I cannot easily forgive her. She has been ungrateful and deceitful. But she is my child, my only child. I cannot abandon her to her fate. She writes me here, that Sir John had private reasons for making a secret marriage——"

"Marriage! Is she married?"

"If she is not, he shall answer it, the infernal villain! But," added the vicar, recovering himself somewhat, "you perceive how all-important it may be not to give evil tongues a handle. You will speak of—you will defend—a runaway match, nothing more. That is bad enough. I must go to London to-night. A train leaves Danecester at midnight. I might drive to a by-station at once, but I should be no better off. We must wait for the twelve o'clock mail; there is no direct train to London between this hour and midnight. Every hour seems an age."

"Yes, yes; you must go. God grant you may find her! Have you any clue?"

"A few words dropped by that man's servant. And his own intention, expressed some time ago, of going to Italy. If I can but

be in time to prevent their leaving England——”

“And Miss Desmond goes with you?”

“Yes. My poor Maudie! Ah, how little your mother thought to what contact with misery and disgrace she was exposing you when she bequeathed you to my care!”

They were the first words of consideration for any human being’s sufferings, save his own, that the vicar had spoken.

Arrangements were hastily made for the departure that evening. Mr. Plew was helpful and active. He ordered a vehicle to take the vicar and his ward to Danecester at seven o’clock. Old Joanna was to be in charge of the house. Catherine sobbed as she packed up a few clothes for Maud.

“Seems like as if a earthquake had comed and swallowed us all up, miss,” said Catherine. The vicar had fought hard to show a brave front to the servants; to keep up appearances, but without much success; for there was no conviction at the bottom of his own heart to enable him to persuade others that all would be well with his daughter. He was too much a man of the world to give credence to the assertion made in the hurried letter left behind her by Veronica, that weighty private reasons

had prevented Sir John Gale from openly demanding her hand, and had induced him to urge her to consent to a clandestine marriage. "For a man of his age and position, there can exist no such reasons," muttered the vicar between his clenched teeth. "Miserable, wretched, misguided, degraded girl! But if there is justice on earth he shall marry her. He shall find that he cannot thus outrage and defy the world. He shall marry her by——"

The dusk was falling when the vicar and his ward drove away from the garden gate of the vicarage. As they passed the spot where Sir John Gale had been found bleeding and insensible on the ground, Mr. Levincourt closed his eyes and groaned aloud.

Maud started, as the scene recalled to her mind the fact that the accident had happened little more than two months ago.

"Two months!" she said to herself, while the tears blinded her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. "How happy we were, only two months ago!"

## CHAPTER XV.

## LADY TALLIS.

It was not until Mr. Levincourt had been seated for some time in the railway carriage, that he remembered that he was ignorant of Lady Tallis's address. Young Lockwood had said that she was in London, but where the vicar knew not.

"Maud!" said he, suddenly, "how are we to find your aunt?"

Maud was leaning her weary head against the cushions, and her eyes were closed. She had not been sleeping, however, for she immediately opened her eyes, and repeated the vicar's words,

"How are we to find my aunt?"

"Yes, how? In the whirl, and confusion, and misery of this dreadful departure it never occurred to me that I do not know Lady

Tallis's address ! Her last letter was dated from the country."

"Mr.—Mrs. Lockwood knows where Aunt Hilda is," answered Maud, after a moment's reflection.

"Yes, yes, yes," said the vicar, with peevish irritability. "Mrs. Lockwood knows ! But where can these people be found ? Merciful Heavens, it is enough to madden one ! It is all confusion and hopeless misery !"

"Dear Uncle Charles, in this I think I can help you. I remember the Lockwoods' address. They live in a street called Gower-street. Do you know it ?"

"Gower-street ? Are you sure ? How do you know ?"

"Mr. Lockwood mentioned that his mother had a house there. Her husband bequeathed it to her, and she lives there."

"Well, I suppose we must drive there the first thing. I know of no other way."

After that the vicar closed his eyes also. But for a long time his brain was tormented by whirling thoughts. Occasionally a gleam of something like hope darted into his mind. Might it not be possible that all would yet go well with Veronica ? Some fathers would have deemed that by no possibility could it be altogether well with her. It could not be well

to be the wife of a man who had induced her to leave her home clandestinely, to deceive and inflict torturing anxiety on her father; a man who had, at the least, caused a temporary slur to be cast on her reputation, and who had risked tarnishing her good name for ever. But in his present wretchedness it seemed to the vicar that to know Veronica Sir John Gale's wife, would in itself be happiness and peace of mind. And it must be remembered that Charles Levincourt was at heart a worldly man; that the somewhat lax tone of morals and want of high principle which he had observed in Sir John Gale's conversation would by no means have induced him to refuse the baronet his daughter's hand, had he asked for it openly. But he was keenly alive to the disgrace of his daughter's elopement; and not the least sharp pang he felt was caused by the reflection that Veronica had thoroughly deceived him.

At length he fell into an uneasy sleep, through which he was dimly conscious of mental pain, and of a dread of waking. From this slumber he was aroused by Maud's hand on his shoulder and Maud's voice in his ear, faltering out that she believed they must have reached London.

They were in London. The railway station

looked inexpressibly dreary, with its long vistas ending in black shadow, its sickly lamps blinking like eyes that have watched all night and are weary, and its vast glazed roof, through which the grey dawn was beginning to glimmer.

It was yet too early to attempt to go to Mrs. Lockwood's house. They must wait at least a couple of hours. The vicar looked so worn, aged, and ill, that Maud tried to persuade him to seek some rest at the hotel close to the station, promising that he should be roused in due time. But he refused to do so.

"Sit here," he said, leading Maud into a waiting-room, where there was a dull coke fire smouldering slowly, and where a solitary gas-light shed a yellow glare over a huge, bare, shining centre table, leaving the rest of the apartment in almost darkness. "You will be safe and unmolested here. I must go and make some inquiries—try to find some trace—— Remain here till I return."

Maud thought she had never seen a room so utterly soul-depressing. No place would have appeared cheerful to her at that moment; but this railway waiting-room was truly a dreary and forlorn apartment. She sat there cowering over the dull red fire, sick, and

chilly, and sad ; listening nervously to every echoing footfall on the long platform without ; to the whistle of some distant engine, screaming as though it had lost its way in the labyrinthine network of lines that converged just outside the great terminus, and were wildly crying for help and guidance ; listening to the frequent clang of a heavy swing-door, the occasional sound of voices (once a man laughed aloud, and she involuntarily put her hands up to her startled ears to shut out the sound that jarred on every quivering nerve with agonising discord), and to the loud, deliberate ticking of a clock above the waiting-room door.

At length—how long the time had seemed ! —Mr. Levincourt returned.

Maud started up, and tried to read in his face if he had any tidings of Veronica, but she did not venture to speak. He answered her appealing look :

“ I have seen the station-master,” he said. “ They have not been here. I believe that much is certain. The man was civil, and caused inquiries to be made among the people—oh, my God, that I should have to endure this degradation !—but there was no trace of such people as I described. This man made a



suggestion. They might have left the main line at Dibley, and either come to London by the other line, thus arriving at a station at the opposite end of the town; or—as I think more probable—have reached the junction that communicates with the coast railways, and so got down to the sea without touching London at all.”

“O, Uncle Charles!”

“Come, my poor child, let me at least put you into a shelter where you will be safe from the contamination of our disgrace. You look half dead, my poor Maudie! Come, there is a cab waiting here outside.”

As Maud moved towards the door to obey his summons, the light of the gas-lamp fell full on her pale face, and he almost exclaimed aloud at her startling resemblance to her mother.

It seemed to the vicar that the remembrance of his old love, thus called up at this moment, filled his heart with bitterness even to overflowing.

“O me!” he groaned; “I wish it were all over! I am weary of my life.”

The cab rattled over the stones through the still nearly empty streets.

Maud’s remembrance of any part of London was very vague. She had never even seen

the neighbourhoods through which she was now being jolted. It all looked squalid, mean, grimy, and uninviting under the morning light. At last they came into a long street, of which the further end was veiled and concealed by a dense foggy vapour.

"What number, miss?" asked the cabman, turning round on his seat.

"What do you say?" asked Maud, faintly.

"What number, miss? This 'ere is Gower-street."

"O!" cried Maud, despairingly. "I don't remember the number!"

The cabman had pulled up his horse, and was now examining the lash of his whip with an air of philosophical indifference, like a man who is weighed upon by no sense of responsibility. After a minute or so, he observed, with great calmness, "That's ockkard; Gower-street is raythur a long street, and it 'll take some time to knock at all the doors both sides o' the way." Then he resumed the examination of his whip lash.

"O, Uncle Charles, I am so sorry!" murmured Maud. "What shall we do?"

Mr. Levincourt jumped out of the cab, and ran to a door where there was a young woman washing the steps.

"Do you happen to know," he asked,

"whereabouts in this street a Mrs. Lockwood lives?"

"Mrs. Lockwood!" echoes the girl, drying her steaming arms on her apron, "*this* is Mrs. Lockwood's."

The vicar beckoned to the cabman, who had also alighted by this time, and who now led his raw-boned horse up to the door at a funereal pace.

"My good girl," said the vicar, "will you take a message to your mistress *at once*? It is of the greatest importance."

"Missus ain't up yet," rejoined the servant, staring first at him, then at Maud, and lastly at the cabman, from whom she received a confidential wink, which seemed to claim a common vantage-ground of Cockneyhood between himself and her, and to separate them both from the vicar and his ward.

"I will send up this card to her," said Mr. Levincourt. He took out a card and pencil, and wrote some words hastily. Then he gave the girl the card, together with a shilling, and begged her to lose no time in delivering the former to her mistress, whilst she was to keep the latter for herself.

The administration of the bribe appeared to raise the vicar in the cabman's estimation.

The latter officiously pulled down the window-glass on the side next the house, so that Maud could put her head out, and then stood with the handle of the cab-door in his hand, ready for any emergency.

The progress of the servant to her mistress's bedroom was retarded by her efforts to decipher what was written on the card, an attempt in which she only partially succeeded. In about five minutes she came down again, and said to the vicar :

"Missus's best compliments, and the lady as you're a-looking for is lodging in the 'ouse. She's on the first-floor, and will you please walk into the drawing-room?"

The vicar and Maud followed the girl upstairs into a front room, furnished as a sitting-room. It communicated by folding-doors, which were now closed, with another apartment.

The servant drew up the yellow window-blinds, desired the visitors to be seated, and asked, as she prepared to leave the room :

"Who shall I say, please?"

"Mr. Levincourt, and—— Stay! You had better take my card in to her ladyship, and say that her niece is here with me, and would be glad if she might see her."

The servant departed into the adjoining chamber, as it appeared, for the sound of voices very slightly muffled by the folding-doors was heard immediately. In a very few minutes the girl returned, begging Maud to follow her.

"She ain't up yet, but she'd like to see you, miss; and she'll come out to you, sir, as soon as possible."

Maud obeyed her aunt's summons, and the vicar was left alone, standing at the window, and looking at the monotonous line of the opposite houses. He was, in a measure, relieved by the fact that the first surprise and shock to Lady Tallis of his presence and his errand in London would be over before he saw her. He felt a strong persuasion that tact and self-possession were by no means poor Hilda's distinguishing characteristics, and he had nervously dreaded the first meeting with her. Although he had placed himself as far as possible from the folding-doors, he could hear the voices rising and falling in the adjoining room, and occasionally could distinguish her ladyship's tones in a shrill exclamation.

He tapped his fingers with irritable impatience on the window. Why did not Maud

urge her aunt to hasten? She knew that every minute was of importance to him. He would wait no longer. He would go away, and return later.

As he so thought, the door opened, and there appeared the woman whom he had last seen in the bloom of her youth more than a score of years ago. The remembrance of the beautiful Hilda Delaney was very distinct in his mind. At the sound of the opening door, he turned round and beheld a figure startlingly at variance with that remembrance: a small, lean, pale old woman, huddled in a dark-coloured wrapper, and with a quantity of soft grey hair untidily thrust into a brown-silk net.

"My dear friend," said she, taking both the vicar's hands—"my poor dear friend!"

Her voice had an odd, cracked sound, like the tone of a broken musical instrument which has once given forth sweet notes; and she spoke with as unmistakable a brogue as though she had never passed a day out of the County Cork.

"Ah! ye wouldn't have known me, now, would ye?" she continued, looking up into the vicar's face.

"Yes," he answered, after an instant's

glance—"Yes, I should have known you." And indeed as he looked, her face became familiar to his eyes. She retained the exquisite delicacy of skin which had been one of her chief beauties, but it was now blanched and wan, and marked with three or four deep lines round the mouth, though on the forehead it remained smooth. There was still the regular clear-cut outline, but exaggerated into sharpness. There were still the large, finely-shaped, lustrous hazel eyes, but with a glitter in them that seemed too bright for health, and with traces of much wailing and weeping in their heavy lids. She was a kindly, foolish, garrulous, utterly undignified old woman.

"I have come," said the vicar, "to ask you to give shelter and protection to this dear child. My house is no home for her now, and Heaven knows when I shall return to it myself. I suppose Maud has—has told you?"

"Ah, my dear Mr. Levincourt, where would the child find shelter and protection if not with her poor dear mother's only sister? And hasn't it been the wish of my heart to have her with me all these years? And indeed when Clara died I would have adopted her outright, if I'd been let. But not having any

daughter of my own—though to be sure a boy would have been best, because of the baronetcy, and *he* never forgave me, I believe, for not giving him a son—of course I—— But indeed I am truly distressed at your misfortune, and I hope that things may not be so bad as ye fear. A runaway mar'ge is objectionable, there's no doubt of that in the world. Still, ye know, my dear Mr. Levincourt, it won't be the first, and I'd wager not the last. And upon my honour I can't see but that the runaway mar'ges may turn out as well sometimes as those that are arranged in the regular way; though goodness knows that is not saying much, after all."

Here the poor lady paused to heave a deep sigh, and then, seating herself close to Maud, she took her niece's hand and pressed it affectionately.

The vicar perceived that Lady Tallis had but a very imperfect conception of the real state of the case. The truth was, that she had not permitted Maud to explain it to her, being too much absorbed in the joy and surprise of seeing her niece to give heed or sympathy to the fate of the vicar's daughter. Her life had been so utterly joyless and empty of affection for so many years, that the lonely



woman not unnaturally clutched at this chance of happiness with the selfish eagerness of a starving creature who snatches at food.

"It is very, very dreadful, Aunt Hilda," Maud had said, lowering her voice, lest it should reach the ears of the vicar in the next room. "Mr. Levincourt will be heartbroken if he does not find her. And I love her so dearly. My poor Veronica! Oh, why, why did she leave us?"

But her aunt could not help dwelling on the hope that out of this trouble might come a gleam of comfort to her own desolate life.

She had soothed and kissed the sobbing girl, and had poured out a stream of incoherent talk, as she hastily huddled some clothes about her.

"Hush, dear child! Don't be fretting, my poor pet! You will stay here with me, safe, now! Sure they'll find her beyond a doubt. Of course the man will marry her. And as to running away, why, my darling child, though I'd be loath to inculcate the practice, or to recommend it to any well-brought-up girl, still ye know very well that it's a thing that happens every day. There was Miss Grogan, of the Queen's County, one of the most dashing girls that ye ever saw in all your

days, eloped with a subaltern in a marching regiment. But she had fifty thousand pounds of her own, the very moment she came of age ; so of course they were very comfortable in a worldly point of view, and the whole county visited them just as much as if they had had banns published in the parish church every day for a year. And yet, at first, her family were in the greatest distress—the very greatest distress—though he was second cousin of Lord Clontarf, and an extremely elegant young fellow. But of course I understand Mr. Levincourt's feelings, and I am sincerely sorry for him—I am indeed."

So, in speaking to the vicar, her tone, although not unsympathising, was very different from what it would have been had she at all realised the terrible apprehensions which racked his mind.

"Ye'll stay and have a mouthful of breakfast with me, my dear Mr. Levincourt?" she said, seeing him about to depart. "I will have it got ready immediately. And indeed you must both be fainting, after travelling all night, too—— What's the matter?"

The question was caused by a ghastly change which had come over the vicar's face. His eyes were fixed on the direction on an en-

velope which lay on the table. He pointed to it silently. Lady Tallis stared in alarm and bewilderment; but Maud, springing to the vicar's side, looked over his shoulder at the writing.

"Oh, Aunt Hilda!" she gasped. "What does this mean?"

"What, child? What in the world is the matter? That? Sure that's a bill, sent in by my shoemaker!"

"But the name?" said the vicar, with a sudden, startling fierceness.

"The name? Well, it's my name; whose else should it be? Oh, to be sure—I see now! Ah! ye didn't know that he took another name about two years ago. Did ye never hear of his uncle, the rich alderman? The alderman left him thirty thousand pounds, on condition that he should tack his name on to his old one, and give him the honour and glory of sending down his own plebeian appellation with the baronetcy. So of course when he changed his name, I changed mine; for I *am* his wife, though I make no doubt that he would be glad enough to deny it if he could. Only that, being his wife, he has more power to tyrannise over me than he has over anybody else. But then——"

"But what is he called now, Aunt Hilda?" interrupted Maud, seeing that her guardian was in an agony of speechless suspense. "What names does—does your husband go by?"

"Indeed, my pet, *that's* more than I can say; but his rightful style and title is Sir John Tallis Gale, Baronet, and I suppose you knew that much before!"

"O my God!" groaned the vicar, sinking into a chair, and letting his head drop on his hands.

"Uncle Charles!" screamed Maud, throwing her arms around him. "O Uncle Charles! It will kill him!"

But the vicar was not dying. He was living to a rush of horrible sensations; grief, astonishment, shame, and anger. The indelibility of the disgrace inflicted on him; the hopelessness of any remedy; the infamy that must attend his child's future life, were all present to his mind with instant and torturing vividness. But of these mingled emotions, anger was the predominant one, and it grew fiercer with every second that passed. His love for his daughter had ever been marked more by pride than by depth or tenderness. This pride was now trampled in the dust, and a feeling

of implacable resentment arose in his mind against her who had inflicted the anguish of such a humiliation.

He raised his face distorted by passion.

"From this hour forth I disown and abandon her," he said, in quivering tones. "No one is my friend who speaks her name to me. In the infamy she has chosen, let her live and die. And may God so punish her for the misery she has caused——"

Maud fell down on her knees before him and seized his hands. "Oh hush, oh pray, pray hush, dear Uncle Charles!" she sobbed out. "Think how sorry you would be if you said the words! How you would repent and be sorry all your life long!"

"For mercy's sake!" exclaimed Lady Tallis, in a tremulous voice, "what is it all about? My dearest child, you positively must not sob in that heartbreaking manner! Sure you'll make yourself ill."

"And for one who is not worth a tear!" added the vicar. "For one who—— But I will never mention her name again. It is over. She is lost and gone irrevocably. Lady Tallis, I would have spared you this, if I could have guessed the extent of the degradation that has fallen upon me. My presence in your house at this moment is almost an outrage."

The poor lady sat down in a chair, and pressing her hands to her forehead, began to whimper. "I'd be unspeakably obliged to ye, Mr. Levincourt," she said, "if you would do me the favour to explain. My poor head is in a whirl of confusion. I really and truly am not strong enough to support this kind of thing!"

"We have each of us a horrible burden to support," rejoined the vicar, almost sternly. "And God knows that mine is not the least heavy. You have been entirely separated from your husband for some years?"

"Oh, indeed I have! That is to say, there never has been a legal separation, but——"

The vicar interrupted her. "He has assumed another name, and has been living abroad?"

"As to the name, I am sure of that, because I learnt it from his agent, to whom I am sometimes compelled to have recourse for money. But for where he has been living, I assure you, my dear Mr. Levincourt——"

"The villain who has carried away my daughter—stolen her from a home in which he had received every kindness and hospitable care that my means permitted me to lavish on him—that black-hearted, thankless, infamous scoundrel, Lady Tallis, is—Sir John Gale."

## BOOK II.



## CHAPTER I.

## AUNT AND NIECE.

IN the first shock of amazement at the calamity which had overtaken the family at the vicarage, none of those who participated in it had had room in their minds for the entertainment of any minor sensation of surprise. But it was not very long—not many days, that is to say—before Lady Tallis, or as her proper title now ran, Lady Tallis Gale, began to wonder how Mr. Levincourt had discovered her whereabouts, and to question Maud on the subject.

The latter had been very ill during the first days of her stay in London. Grief and anxiety alone would not have prostrated the youthful vigour of her body. But so many

harrowing emotions preceding a long night-journey, and so overwhelming a shock awaiting at the close of the journey a frame in great need of food and rest, had stricken down the young girl, and laid her on a bed of sickness.

Her aunt forgot her own delicacy of health and inert habits to tend Maud. She would scarcely allow a servant to come near the suffering girl, but waited on her day and night with untiring care.

In spite of the terrible circumstances which had brought Maud to London, in spite of the dreadful discovery that the man who had been guilty of the abduction of Veronica Levincourt was the husband who had wronged, outraged, and finally abandoned herself, it would not be too much to say that Hilda Tallis enjoyed the first moments of happiness she had known during many weary years, by the bedside of her sister's child.

It was sweet to feel that there was some one bound by the ties of blood to feel kindly toward her. It was still sweeter to find a being who — at least for a time — depended upon *her* for love and care and tendance.

The poor lonely wife, in the first days of the discovery that her husband had ceased to feel for her, even such love as can be inspired



by a fair face, had longed with all her heart for a child.

The conduct of Sir John Tallis, which had gone on deepening through every shade, from grey indifference down to absolutely black brutality, had effectually quenched whatever germ of regard for him poor Hilda might once have cherished. But for some time she clung to the idea that he would be kinder to her if there were any prospect of her bringing him an heir. She was the kind of woman who would probably have loved her children better than her husband, even had that husband been good and affectionate. She would have enjoyed superintending the government of a nursery, and have craved for no other companionship than that of her prattling babies.

The dependency of sickness made Maud appear almost like a child in her aunt's eyes. Lady Tallis nursed her with more than needful devotion. She was jealous of any person save herself approaching her niece to render any service. The sound of Maud's voice calling on her for the least tendance was music in her ears. She would even have liked the sick girl to be more exacting in her demands. And had Maud been the most fretful and imperious of invalids, instead of being, as she was,

thoroughly patient and self-controlled, Lady Tallis would have joyfully indulged her in every whim.

In a few days, however, the illness passed away, and Maud insisted on rising, although Lady Tallis declared that she ought not to leave her bed for at least another week to come.

The vicar remained in London until Maud's health was re-established. He lingered about the house in Gower-street fitfully, and would seldom consent to enter Lady Tallis's apartments, but he informed himself daily of his ward's condition.

At length, after rather more than a fortnight's sojourn in London, he returned to Shipley.

"It is a horrible trial to go back," said he, in his farewell interview with Maud.

"Must you go, Uncle Charles?" she asked, her eyes brimming with tears, which she kept from falling by a strong effort of will.

"Must I? Yes: I cannot give up the vicarage. I cannot exist without it. I cannot afford to pay another man to do my duty there, and retain enough to live upon. I might put off the evil day a while longer. But to what purpose? The sight of the place—the very name of the place—is loathsome to me. But what can I do?"

"I wish I could help you!"

"You cannot help me, Maudie. No one can help me."

Then Maud asked a timid faltering question, holding his hand and turning away her head as she spoke. Had he heard any tidings of—of—the fugitives?

She could not see his face, but his voice was very stern and deep as he answered her. They had gone abroad together, he had learned. Gone to Italy. It mattered nothing to what place. *She* was dead to him henceforward. Maud must mention her name no more. He had answered her question; but she must promise him never to speak to him of his lost daughter more.

"I *cannot* promise it, dear Uncle Charles," said Maud, no longer able to restrain her tears.

"Maud! Do not you separate yourself from me, too!"

"No, no! I shall always love you, and be grateful to you. But I—I *cannot* make that promise. Some day you might be glad yourself that I did not make it."

Mr. Levincourt rose. "Good-bye, Maud," he said, abruptly. "The time is drawing near for my departure. I have but a couple of hours before leaving London."

He went out and closed the door. She heard his footsteps descending the stairs slowly and heavily. He paused, came back, and re-entering the room where Maud was silently weeping, took her in his arms and kissed her forehead. She clung to him, sobbing. "O thank you," she murmured — "thank you for coming back. You are not angry with me, dear Uncle Charles?"

"No, no; not angry—never angry with thee, my sweet childie. God bless thee, Maud! God for ever bless thee!"

"You will write to me, Uncle Charles, will you not?"

"I—perhaps—well, well, I *will* write to you."

"And I may come and stay with you again some day? If even it is but for a time, I may come? You will be so lonely!" she added, with a passionate burst of tears.

"Heaven knows, my child! It may be that some day—— Good-bye, Maud. God Almighty bless and guard you for ever!"

Then he went away.

Lady Tallis's intentions in her behaviour to her niece were all kindness, but it often happened that she inflicted pain from want of judgment. But on the evening of the day on which the above interview took place, Lady Tallis's

garrulity was grateful to Maud's feelings. So long as her aunt would talk on indifferent subjects, and let her listen in silence, or at most with the occasional contribution of a monosyllable, the young girl was able to retain a calmness and quietude that were soothing to mind and body.

Lady Tallis's conversation rambled on discursively from topic to topic. She talked of scenes familiar to her own childhood, and of persons who died before Maud was born, as though the latter must naturally be thoroughly acquainted with what *she* knew so well.

All at once she laid down her work, and exclaimed: "Oh, by-the-bye, now! There's something I *particularly* wanted to say to ye, and I have never said it yet!"

Maud was beginning to understand that her aunt's emphasis was by no means always proportioned to the importance of that which she had to say: at least as far as she (Maud) could judge of the relative amount of importance that could fairly be attributed to Lady Tallis's speeches. She was therefore less startled than she might have been a fortnight earlier, by her aunt's impressive announcement.

"What is it that you wanted to say, Aunt Hilda?"

"Why, my goodness, my darling child, I wonder how in the world I never asked the question before! It has been in my mind *hundreds* of times!"

Maud waited patiently with an attentive face.

"How in the world, did you and Mr. Levincourt find out that I was living here? D'ye know, my dear pet, I am perfectly astonished to remember that I was not *more* astonished at the time! Can ye understand that state of mind? It was all such a whirl, such a sudden, unexpected kind of thing altogether, that I suppose a little wonder more or less didn't make much difference!"

"Our coming straight to the place where you lived, was a mere chance, Aunt Hilda. We came here with merely a hope, and not a very strong one, that we might get your address from Mrs. Lockwood. And even then, we should not have found you, had not Uncle Charles's card been carried up to Mrs. Lockwood with an inquiry for Lady Tallis written on it. Otherwise, as you are now Lady Gale, we should have missed you, though you were so close to us. But Mrs. Lockwood knew at

once that you were the person we were asking for."

"And did ye know Mrs. Lockwood? Why now, just imagine her never mentioning in the most distant manner, that she had the smallest acquaintance with any of the family! I declare it's most extraordinary! And the *times* I have spoken to her of my niece! For, my darling, I needn't say that if we have been separated all these years, it has not been from any indifference on my part!"

Maud quietly explained that she had never seen or known Mrs. Lockwood, but that she had met her son at a country house; and that he had spoken of Lady Tallis, and of the manner in which he and his mother had made her ladyship's acquaintance.

"It's all perfectly true, my dear, every syllable of it!" said Lady Tallis, with as much solemnity of corroboration as though Maud had expressed the gravest doubts of Mr. Hugh Lockwood's veracity.

"Yes, aunt: I did not feel any doubt of that," she answered.

"No, ye need not, child. An exceedingly amiable and gentleman-like young man he is. And his mother is a delightful person. I called on her according to promise, when I came to

London. I was staying in a boarding-house; and that's what I would *never* advise any one I cared for to do, the longest day they had to live! Oh, upon my honour and word, the dreariness and misery of the boarding-houses I have been in, exceed description. I thought I would find something like society, but, oh dear me! the people you have to put up with, are something unspeakable! However, that wasn't what I was going to tell ye. Well, I asked Mrs. Lockwood, did she happen to know of any respectable lodging in her neighbourhood. For I was resolved to get quit of boarding-houses altogether. And I wished to be within hail of some human being that would say a kind word to me once a month, or so: for, indeed, child, I was *very* lonely."

"Poor Aunt Hilda!" whispered Maud, stroking Lady Tallis's thin hand.

"Oh indeed ye may say 'rich Aunt Hilda,' now I have you, Maudie. Here, let me put this footstool under your feet. Nonsense, child, about 'troubling myself.' You're not half as strong yet as you fancy yourself. There! Well, so just fancy my delight when she said that she would be very glad to let the first floor of her own house to a person that she knew! My dear, I *jumped* at it. And



here I am, and extremely comfortable it is. And *cheap*. For you know, my dear child, that *he* keeps me shamefully short of money. Sometimes I have much ado to get any at all. Well, there, then, we won't say any more on *that* score just now. But ye'll like Mrs. Lockwood—oh indeed ye will!"

"Is she—I mean is her son at all like her?"

"Not the very least bit in the world," rejoined Lady Tallis, with a sort of almost triumphant emphasis. "Not one atom. I never, in the whole course of my days, saw a mother and son more *entirely* unlike each other."

"Oh!"

"Entirely unlike each other. Why, now, the young man—Hugh—is a strapping handsome young fellow as you'd be likely to meet in a long summer's day. Isn't he?"

"Oh, yes."

"Oh, yes! Upon my honour, you don't seem more than half to agree with me. But I can tell you that if you don't think Hugh Lockwood a remarkably fine young man, you are more fastidious than the girls used to be in my time. It may be true that he hasn't quite the grand air. And if you are as much of a Delaney as your poor grandpapa, you

may object to that. Hugh certainly is tant soit peu bourgeois."

"Oh, I thought, Aunt Hilda—we all thought at Lowater House—that Mr. Lockwood was thoroughly a gentleman."

"Well, I'm delighted to hear it. I fancied you were turning up your nose at him a little. How flushed you are, child! Let me feel your forehead. No; there's no appearance of fever. And now the colour is fading away again. I shall send you to bed at nine o'clock—not a moment later."

"Very well, Aunt Hilda. But you were saying—that—that Mrs. Lockwood——"

"Oh, to be sure! . Yes; let me see. Mrs. Lockwood—— Oh, now I have it! I was saying that she is so unlike her son, wasn't I? Well, she is. He is, as I said, a strapping robust-looking creature. I suppose he inherits his burliness from his peasant ancestors. His father's father, you know, was—— Ah! you *do* know all about it? Yes—quite rustics. And Hugh is not in the least ashamed of his grandfather."

"Ashamed! Why should he be ashamed?"

"Well, my dear, if you come to that, why should we be proud of *our* ancestors? Upon my word, *I* don't know. Still, there *is* a kind

of feeling. However, Hugh is too manly and upright for any mean pretensions, and I quite respect him for it. But as to his mother, she is the tiniest fairy of a woman you ever saw in all your days. She really is more like one of the 'good people' that our old nurse at Delaney used to tell us about, than anything else—in size, I mean—for there is nothing fantastic about her."

"I am sure to like her for her kindness to you, Aunt Hilda."

"Indeed, she is very kind. And so thoughtful! and has such good manners! She came every day while you were in bed, and inquired about you. But she never intrudes. But I thought of asking her to take tea with us quietly some evening, if you don't mind. For now her son is not at home, she is lonely too. And before I had you, Maudie, I was very glad of Mrs. Lockwood's company."

Maud, of course, begged that her aunt would invite Mrs. Lockwood as often as she chose. But in truth she shrank from the sight of a stranger. There was no hour of the day when Veronica was absent from her thoughts. There had been no preparation for the terrific blow that had fallen. She had bade Veronica farewell that night at Lowater House, with no

faintest foreshadowing of what was to come. She tormented herself sometimes with the idea that if she (Maud) had returned to the vicarage and remained with Veronica, the evil would not have happened. There were moments when she longed, with a painfully intense longing, to set forth to follow the unhappy girl, to find her, and bring her back, and soothe and cherish her, and shelter her among them again. She could not understand that her guardian should abandon his daughter without an effort. Then the doubt arose whether Veronica herself would consent to return.

“If I could go to her, see her, and persuade her, she would come back ; she would leave that dreadful man. She cannot care for him——”

So ran her thoughts. And then the remembrance would startle her like a sudden blow, that the man was the husband of her mother's sister ; and she would hide her face in her trembling hands and shudder with a confused sensation of terror.

She was spared the spectacle of any acute suffering on the part of her aunt.

Lady Tallis made no pretensions to outraged wifely affection. All such sentiment

had been killed in her long years ago. But there was a curious phase of feeling—the last faint protest of her trampled self-respect—the one drop of gall in her submissive nature—which made her regard Veronica with something as near rancour as could be entertained by a character so flavourless, meek, and weak.

Maud shrank with instinctive delicacy from any mention of Veronica to the wife of Sir John Gale. But her aunt had voluntarily spoken of the vicar's daughter on one or two occasions; and had mentioned her in terms that caused Maud the most exquisite pain. The relations of the latter to all concerned in this misery and shame, were peculiarly complicated and delicate. And the sorrowing girl strove to hide her grief. Maud's was still the same nature which had caused Mrs. Levincourt to characterise her as "stolid" and "unfeeling," when she had suppressed her childish tears at sight of the strange faces in her new home. Mrs. Levincourt never knew that the pillow in the little crib had been wetted that first night with bitter, but silent tears. Maud could bear the pain of her wound, but she could not bear that it should be approached by a coarse or unsympathising touch.

For all these reasons, and from the knowledge, speedily acquired, that her aunt was too entirely devoid of dignity to be reticent upon any subject which it entered her head to discuss, Maud looked forward with nervous dread to the introduction of Mrs. Lockwood into Lady Tallis's drawing-room.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE LOCKWOODS.

ZILLAH LOCKWOOD was a very remarkable-looking woman. It was not merely the smallness of her stature that made her so. She was, as Lady Tallis had said, extremely fragile and fairy-like, with very delicate, well-formed hands and feet, and an upright straight figure. But this small frail creature conveyed an almost startling impression of power and resolution: power of an undemonstrative, steady, suppressed kind.

“How enchantingly pretty Mrs. Lockwood must have been!” was the exclamation of nine people out of ten after seeing her for the first time.

Those who remembered Zillah Lockwood in her youth, declared that she had been enchantingly pretty. But it may be doubted whether she had ever been so, in the strict

sense of the word. There could be no doubt, however, that hers must always have been a singularly attractive face. And it was perhaps even more generally attractive at fifty years of age than it had been at twenty. She had an abundance of grey hair, soft, fine, and carefully dressed. Her forehead was low and broad; her eyes were black and sparkling, but their lids were discoloured, and there was a faded, weary look about the whole setting and surrounding of her eyes that contrasted with the fresh delicate paleness of the rest of her complexion.

“Crying spoils the eyes. Years ago I cried, almost incessantly, for six weeks,” she once said, quietly, to one who remarked this peculiarity of her face. “At last they told me that I was risking total loss of sight. So then I got frightened, and left off weeping—with my eyes.”

Her jaw was slightly what is called underhung, and when the lips met and closed firmly (as they habitually did when her face was in repose), this peculiarity gave an expression of singular resolution to her mouth. It looked as though it were forcibly compressed by a special effort of her will. The upper lip was thin and straight. When she spoke, she



showed two perfect ranges of small sharp teeth.

Her whole person was pervaded by an air of scrupulous and dainty neatness. She always wore black, and her head was adorned, not covered, by a white muslin cap, whose crisply-frilled border of delicate lace was a marvel of freshness. The collar at her throat and the cuffs at her wrists were of plain linen in the morning, of lace in the evening, and in either case were guiltless of soil or stain.

“How she does it in this smoky London is more than I can conceive!” would poor Lady Tallis exclaim, casting a pathetic glance on her own dingy and crumpled garments. But her ladyship was one of those unfortunate persons for whose clothes dust and smoke and stains seem to have a mysterious attraction. “Smuts” flew to her collar, and settled there fondly. Dust eddied round her in suffocating clouds whenever she ventured into the streets, or else she found herself wading ankle-deep in mud. Gravy splashed itself over her sleeves at dinner; ink pervaded her attire when she wrote a letter; and the grease from lamp or candle dropped on her silk gown with a frequency which almost seemed to argue conscious malice.

The first impression which Maud Desmond derived from Mrs. Lockwood's appearance and manner was a sense of relief.

She had half expected a vulgar, bustling, good-natured, noisy woman. Maud had gained sufficient knowledge of Lady Tallis to be aware that her perceptions were not acute, nor her taste refined. Indeed Maud, in pondering upon her aunt's character, was frequently brought face to face with problems, the pursuit of which would have led her into deeper speculations than she contemplated attempting. Why was this woman, gently born and bred, endowed with blunter sensibilities, duller brains, coarser—yes, truly coarser—manners than the poor widow of a humble artist, who sprang from mean obscurity and eked out her living as a letter of lodgings? Why, of the two sisters, Hilda and Clara Delaney, had one been a refined, graceful, elegant gentlewoman, and the other—such a woman as Lady Tallis? Maud remembered her mother, and contrasted her bearing and manners with Lady Tallis's. Had Clara Desmond pronounced any woman to be kind, thoughtful, and well-mannered, those persons who knew the speaker would have expected the object of her praise to be one whose society might be pleasant to the

most fastidious. But when Hilda Tallis used the same phrases, Maud perfectly understood that they must be accepted with due reservations.

Her first sensation on meeting Mrs. Lockwood was, therefore, as has been stated, a sensation of relief. It was soon evident that there was no fear of Mrs. Lockwood's failing in discrimination or tact.

"You met my son at Lowater House, Miss Desmond?" said Mrs. Lockwood, stitching away with nimble fingers at the hem of a handkerchief. She had been drinking tea with Lady Tallis, and had seen Maud for the first time that evening.

"Yes. Mr. Lockwood was staying there at the same time with myself."

"Captain Sheardown has always been very kind to Hugh. His father, Admiral Sheardown, was my husband's earliest friend and patron. The admiral had a great taste for art."

"So had poor papa!" exclaimed Lady Tallis. "I remember Clara—your dear mother, my pet—had a very pretty taste for flower-painting. And papa had a master from Dublin to stay in the house nearly the whole of one summer on Clara's account. My brother

James and I couldn't *enjure* him! Sure he was the snuffiest old wretch ye can imagine. We would plague his life out by hiding his snuff-box."

"I expect Hugh home next week," pursued Mrs. Lockwood, calmly.

"And, indeed, I will be delighted to see him again," said her ladyship. "He is a pearl of young men."

"I don't know about being a pearl," said Mrs. Lockwood; "but Hugh is a good son. I think he is on the whole a good man."

"Of course he is! Why wouldn't he be? Hugh is an excellent creature."

"It is a bold assertion to make. In all my life I have only met with two good men."

"Well now, on my honour, I do believe there are a great many good men in the world—if one only knew where to find them!" said Lady Tallis. Then she added, "As for you, you ought to go down on your knees, and thank Heaven for such a son as Hugh. Oh, if I had only had a boy like that I'd have doted on him!"

The faintest possible smile flitted over Mrs. Lockwood's face. She kept her eyes fixed on her work, as she answered, "I have a sneaking kindness for Hugh, myself. But he has his faults."

"I don't believe he has a fault in the world!" protested Lady Tallis, energetically.

"I can assure you that he has, though! Amongst others—obstinacy. Hugh is very obstinate. Ask Miss Desmond if she did not get the impression that my son has a strong will of his own."

Maud had been listening silently to the talk of the two elder women, and had been watching Mrs. Lockwood's face with an intentness that would have been ill-mannered had it not been for the fact that the latter kept her eyes cast down on her work, and so was unconscious of the young girl's close observation. Maud was a little disconcerted when the heavy dark lids were suddenly raised, and the bright eyes beneath them were fixed upon her own.

"Oh, I—I don't know," she said. "I suppose a man ought to have a strong will."

"And a woman——?"

"Oh, a woman," interrupted Lady Tallis, "must just make up her mind to have no will at all! You may fight and struggle, but a man is always the strongest, au bout du compte! And as he has all the power, I don't see what use her *will* can be to a woman!"

"Is that your philosophy, Miss Desmond?"

"Oh, I? I don't think I have any philosophy," answered Maud, simply.

"At all events, rightly or wrongly, my son is obstinate, and he wishes to take a step that I think ought to be deferred yet awhile. He is dying to set up on his own account, as the phrase goes. Digby and West, to whom he was articled, have offered to keep him in their office on advantageous terms, for a couple of years. *I say*, hold fast your one bird in the hand! Hugh hankers after the two in the bush. We shall see. I am afraid Captain Sheardown's councils have confirmed Hugh in his desire. My son writes me that several of his father's old friends in the neighbourhood of Shipley and Danecester have been encouraging him to make the attempt; and have been promising him all sorts of things. Hugh is only twenty-four years old; and he believes most of what is said to him."

"I am quite sure," said Maud, with some warmth, "that Captain Sheardown would say nothing that he did not mean."

"Doubtless. But promises impossible of fulfilment are made with the most perfect sincerity every day."

After a little more desultory chat, Mrs. Lockwood folded up her work, and went away, saying, that she would leave Miss Desmond to go to rest: and that she would prepare with her own hand a basin of arrowroot

for the supper of Lady Tallis, who was not looking strong, she said. "My arrowroot is excellent, I assure you," said Mrs. Lockwood to Maud. "Her ladyship will give me a certificate. I am a very fair cook, am I not, my lady?"

"Indeed, then, I don't know the thing you can *not* do, if you try!" said Lady Tallis, enthusiastically. And, when Mrs. Lockwood was gone, she descanted to Maud on their landlady's talents and good qualities in a strain of unmingled eulogy.

"Now, are ye not enchanted with her?" she asked of her niece.

"I—yes; I like her very much. She is very clever, I think."

"Oh, clever's no word for it. She is an extraordinary little creature; quite extraordinary. You don't know all that's in that head of her's yet, I can assure you."

"I should imagine that she has known much sorrow and trouble," said Maud, musingly. "I wonder what her history is!"

"Oh, as to that," rejoined her ladyship, to whom the suggestion appeared to be a new one, "I don't suppose she has much of a history at all. How would she? She and her husband were quite humble people."

"But, aunt, she has evidently received a good education, and she has the manners of a lady, moreover. Did you notice, too, in reading the title of that French book that lay on the table, how admirably she pronounced it?"

"My dear child, for that matter, we had a dancing-mistress once, who spoke French beautifully! And she was quite an ignorant person. Her father was a Parisian barber, we were told; but she called herself *Mademoiselle de Something* or other. I forget the name now. Any way, Mrs. Lockwood is vastly superior to *her*!"

The incoherence of these remarks, and the impossibility of conjecturing what it was they were intended to prove, silenced Maud.

Presently Lady Tallis exclaimed, in a sudden, pouncing way, which her physical delicacy alone prevented from being absolutely violent: "And ye haven't told me yet how you like my little Queen of the Fairies!"

"Yes, aunt, I said that I liked Mrs. Lockwood very much: only——"

"Only what?"

"Well, it seems rather a pity that she should take such a gloomy view of things, does it not?"

"Gloomy! Now upon my word and



honour a cheerfuller little creature I never saw or heard of! That is *my* notion, my dear girl."

"Gloomy is not the right word, either."

"Very much the wrong word, *I* should say."

"Yes; but what I mean is, that—that—— It is rather difficult to explain. Mrs. Lockwood is cheerful, but it is not because she finds things to be good, Aunt Hilda."

"Well, then, all the more credit to her for being cheerful."

"I think she would be more likely to be credulous of an evil report than a good report; not because she is ill-natured, but because she *expects* evil to happen, and thinks it likely. I am sure that she must have had some great trouble in her life."

At the beginning of the following week Hugh Lockwood returned home. He had, of course, already learned from his mother the fact that Lady Tallis and her niece were inmates of the house in Gower-street.

He was able to inform his mother of many particulars of the blow which had fallen on the family at the vicarage. The whole country was ringing with the story. Hugh had heard it discussed in all sorts of tones, by all

sorts of people. A great number were inclined to blame Mr. Levincourt severely, for having been culpably negligent in regard to his daughter's association with a man like Sir John Gale. On the other hand, many persons (especially matrons of Mrs. Begbie's stamp) declared that bolts and bars would not have sufficed to keep Veronica Levincourt in respectable obscurity; that they had always known, always seen, always prophesied, how it would end; that the girl's vanity and coquetry had long made them cautious of permitting her to associate with their daughters; and that it was all very well to blame the man—of course he was a wretch! no doubt of it!—but he must have been regularly hunted down, you know, by that artful, abandoned, dreadful, *dreadful* girl!

"There's nothing so cruel as the cruelty of one woman to another!" said Hugh, after recounting some of these sayings to his mother.

"Is there not?" said Mrs. Lockwood, composedly. "And Mrs. Sheardown," she pursued, after a moment's pause, "is she too among the number of the cruel?"

"No; Mrs. Sheardown could not be cruel!

No, she is not cruel. But she is—even *she* is—a little hard on the girl."

"H'm! Is this Miss Levincourt so very handsome as they say? You have seen her?"

"Yes; I saw her at Lowater. She is strikingly beautiful. I do not know that I ever saw such eyes and such colouring."

"And not vain or coquettish, as these 'cruel' women say?"

"I—well, yes, I think she is fond of admiration. But her manner was very charming."

"*That* is charming, Hugh; that love of admiration. Masculine vanity is always tickled by the implied flattery of a pretty woman's airs and graces."

"Flattery!"

"To be sure. Haughty or espiègle, stately or languid, what a coquette wants, is *your* attention; and that flatters you. How many men, do you suppose, would think Venus herself beautiful, if she honestly did not care two straws whether they looked at her or not?"

"Well, mother, despite my 'masculine vanity,' I can truly say that I never in all my life saw a girl whom I should have been less

likely to fall in love with, than Veronica Levincourt."

"That was fortunate for you!"

"Good, kind Mrs. Sheardown thought me in some danger, I believe, for she dropped a word or two of warning—— That man must be as black a scoundrel as ever existed!" cried Hugh, suddenly breaking off.

"Is the identity of Sir John Gale with Sir John Tallis known in Shipley?"

"Yes; I had learned it from your letters. But except to the Sheardowns, I said no word of the matter. But an old woman who was staying at Dr. Begbie's—a certain Betsy Boyce—wrote up to some gossip-mongering crony in London for information about Sir John Gale. And in that way the whole story became known."

"Of course you did not see Mr. Levincourt again?"

"No one has seen him except his own servants and little Plew, the surgeon, since his daughter's flight."

"Not even in church?"

"Oh in church, of course, he has been seen. The Sheardowns purposely stayed away from St. Gildas the first Sunday after the vicar's return. But I was told that the rustics, who

compose the majority of the congregation, behaved with more delicacy than might have been expected from them. They kept out of the vicar's way on leaving church; and those who did see him, contented themselves with silently touching their hats, and passing on. By the way, the person who told me all this, is horribly cut up by this dreadful affair. It is a certain Mr. Plew, a surgeon, and a really good little fellow. The village gossips say that he was a bond-slave of Miss Levincourt. I never saw a man look more miserable. He fought her battles tooth and nail, until it became known that Sir John Gale had a wife already. Then of course there was no more to be said of the girl's being married to him. But although Plew is the mildest-looking little fellow you ever saw, I should not care to be in the shoes of any man who spoke an ill word of Miss Levincourt in his presence. And the Shipley folks understand this so well, that if a group of them are discussing the vicar's daughter, they break off at Plew's approach as though he were her brother. He is a loyal little fellow, and I am sorry for him with all my heart."

"He must be a very uncommon sort of man," observed Mrs. Lockwood, dryly.

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“Ah, mother, mother!” exclaimed Hugh, kissing her forehead, and looking at her half fondly, half sadly, “our old quarrel! I cannot understand how it is that such a good woman as you are should find it so hard to believe in goodness!”

## CHAPTER III.

## IN MR. FROST'S SANCTUM.

MESSRS. FROST AND LOVEGROVE, solicitors, had their offices in a large old house in Bedford-square. The whole of the ground-floor was used for offices. In the upper part of the house lived the family of the junior partner.

The chief reason for selecting the locality of the offices—which did not sound, Mr. Lovegrove said, an altogether “professional” address—was that he might enjoy the advantage of residing at his place of business; of being, as he was fond of mentioning, “on the spot.”

“That is exactly what I *don't* want,” said Mr. Frost. And accordingly he inhabited a house at Bayswater.

But the Lovegroves, especially the female Lovegroves, declared in family conclave that Mr. Frost lived at Bayswater rather than at

Bedford-square, because Mrs. Frost deemed Bedford-square vulgar. She was reported to have asked where it was, with a vague air of wonder, as of an inquirer into the geography of Central Africa. And Augustus Lovegrove, junior, the only son of the family, gave an imitation of Mrs. Frost setting out to visit her husband's office, furnished with a sandwich-case and a flask of sherry, as though for a long journey; and mimicked the tone of fashionable boredom in which she asked the coachman where one changed horses to go to Bedford-square. But that, said his sisters, was only Gus's fun.

In fact, there was a suppressed, but not the less deadly, feud between the houses of Frost and Lovegrove on all social points. In their business relations the two partners seldom jarred.

Mr. Frost was a much cleverer man than Mr. Lovegrove. He was also the better educated of the two, and nature had gifted him with a commanding person and an impressive address.

Mr. Lovegrove was a common-place individual. He said of himself that he had a great power of sticking to business: and he said truly. Mr. Frost entirely appreciated his



partner's solid and unobtrusive merits. He declared Lovegrove to be "a thoroughly safe dependable fellow." And the flavour of patronage in his approbation was in no degree distasteful to Mr. Lovegrove. In the office, their respective qualities and acquirements were the complement of each other; and they agreed admirably. Out of the office, their views were so dissimilar as to be antagonistic.

Mr. Lovegrove was a very devout high churchman, and shook his head gravely over Mr. Frost's want of orthodoxy. Indeed, to describe Mr. Frost's opinions as unorthodox was to characterise them with undue mildness. Mr. Frost was a confirmed sceptic, and his scepticism was nearly allied to cynicism.

There is a homely illustration immortalised by the pen of a great modern writer, which may, perhaps, convey an idea of the state of Mr. Frost's mind. In one of that great writer's well-known pages, political reformers are warned when they empty the dirty water out of the tub, not to send the baby whose ablutions have been made in it floating down the kennel likewise. Get rid of the dirty water by all means: but—save the baby!

Now Mr. Frost, it was to be feared, had not saved the baby.

Then the women of the two families did not stand in amicable relations towards each other. Mrs. Lovegrove was envious of Mrs. Frost, and Mrs. Frost was disdainful of Mrs. Lovegrove.

The two husbands would occasionally remonstrate, each with the wife of his bosom, respecting this inconvenient, not to say reprehensible, state of things; and would openly, in marital fashion, wonder why the deuce the women were so spiteful and so silly!

"I wish, Georgy," Mr. Frost would say, "that you would behave with decent civility to Lovegrove's wife when you meet her. She does not come in your way often. I think it very selfish that you will not make the least effort to oblige me, when I have told you so often how serious an inconvenience it would be to me to have any coolness with Lovegrove."

"*Why* can't you get on with Mrs. Frost, Sarah?" Mr. Lovegrove would ask, gravely. "I and Frost never have a word together; and two more different men you would scarcely find."

But none the less did a feeling of animosity

smoulder in the breasts of the two ladies. And perhaps the chief circumstance that prevented the feeling from breaking out into a blaze, was the wide distance which separates Bayswater from Bedford-square.

At the latter place, Mr. Frost had a little private room, the last and smallest of a suite of three, opening one within the other, which looked on to a smoke-blackened yard, some five feet square. Mr. Frost had shut out the view of the opposite wall by the expedient of having his window frame filled with panes of coloured glass. This diminished the already scanty quantity of daylight that was admitted into the room. But Mr. Frost neither came to his office very early, nor remained there very late, so that his work there was done during those hours of the day in which, when the sun shone at all, he sent his beams in through the red and purple panes of the window.

It was understood in the office that when Mr. Frost closed the outer one of the green-baize double doors which shut in his private room, he was not to be disturbed save on the most pressing and important business. So long as only the inner door remained closed, Mr. Frost was accessible to six-and-eightpence-

yielding mortals. But when once the weight which usually kept the outer door open was removed, and the dark green portal had swung to, with a swift noiseless passage of the cords over their pulleys, then no clerk in the employ of the firm, scarcely even Mr. Lovegrove himself, willingly undertook the task of disturbing the privacy of the senior partner.

And yet one morning, soon after Hugh Lockwood's return to London, Mrs. Lockwood walked into the offices at Bedford-square, and required that Mr. Frost should be informed of her presence; despite the fact, carefully pointed out to her notice, that Mr. Frost's room was shut by the outer door; and that, consequently, Mr. Frost was understood to be particularly engaged.

"I feel sure that Mr. Frost would see me, if you would be good enough to take in my name," said the little woman, looking into the face of the clerk who had spoken to her.

There was something almost irresistible in the composed certainty of her manner. Neither were the ladylike neatness of her dress, and the soft, sweet, refined tone of her voice, without their influence on the young man.

"Have you an appointment?" he asked, hesitating.

"Not precisely an appointment for this special morning. But I have frequently been admitted at this hour by Mr. Frost. If you will kindly take in my name to him, I am quite willing to assume the responsibility of disturbing him."

"Well, you see, ma'am, that's just what you *can't* do. The responsibility must be on my shoulders, whether it turns out that I am doing right or wrong. However, since you say that Mr. Frost has seen you at this time, before—— Perhaps you can give me a card to take in to him."

Mrs. Lockwood took a little note-book out of her pocket, tore off a blank page, and wrote on it with the neatest of tiny pencils, the initials Z. L.

"I have no card," she said, smiling, "but if you will show Mr. Frost that paper, I think you will find that he will admit me."

The clerk disappeared, and returned in a few moments, begging the lady to step that way.

The lady did step that way, and the green-baize door closed silently behind her short, trim, black figure.

Mr. Frost was seated at a table covered with papers. On one side, and within reach of his

hand, stood a small cabinet full of drawers. It was a handsome antique piece of furniture, of inlaid wood; and would have seemed more suited to a lady's boudoir than to a lawyer's office. But there was in truth very little of what Mr. Lovegrove called "the shop" about the furniture or fittings of this tiny sanctum. The purple carpet was soft and rich, the walls were stained of a warm stone colour, and the two easy chairs—the only seats which the small size of the room gave space for—were covered with morocco leather of the same hue as the carpet. Over the chimney-piece hung a landscape; one of the blackest and shiniest that Wardour-street could turn out. Mr. Frost called it (and thought it) a *Salvator Rosa*.

The only technical belongings visible in the room, were a few carefully selected law books, on a spare shelf near the window.

"Lovegrove does all the pounce and parchment business," Mr. Frost was wont to say, jocosely. "He likes it."

But no client who had ever sat in the purple morocco easy-chair opposite to Mr. Frost, failed to discover that, however much that gentleman might profess to despise those outward and visible symbols of his profession which he

characterised generically as pounce and parchment, yet he was none the less a keen, acute, practical, hard-headed lawyer.

Mr. Frost looked up from his papers as Mrs. Lockwood quietly entered the room. His face wore a look of care, and almost of premature age; for his portly upright figure, perfectly dark hair, and vigour of movement, betokened a man still in the prime of his strength. But his face was livid and haggard, and his eyebrows were surmounted by a complex series of wrinkles, which drew together in a knot, that gave him the expression of one continually and painfully at work in the solution of some weighty problem.

He rose and shook hands with Mrs. Lockwood, and then waved her to the chair opposite to his own.

"Tell me at once," he said, folding his hands before him on the table and slightly bending forward as he addressed the widow, "if your business is really pressing. I scarcely think there is another person in London whom I would have admitted at this moment."

"My business *is* pressing. And I am much obliged to you," replied Mrs. Lockwood, looking at him steadily.

"You think, with your usual incredulity,

that I had no real occupation when your visit interrupted me. Sometimes, I grant you, I shut myself in here for a little——Hah! I was going to say *peace*!—for a little quiet, for leisure to think for myself, instead of hiring out my thinking faculties to other people. But to-day it was not so. Look here!”

He pointed to the mass of papers under his hand (on the announcement of Mrs. Lockwood's approach he had thrown a large sheet of blotting-paper over them), and fluttered them rapidly with his fingers. “I have been going through these, and was only half-way when you came.”

“Bills?” said Mrs. Lockwood.

“Some bills, and some—— Yes; chiefly bills. But they all need looking at.”

As he spoke he thrust them aside with a careless gesture, which half hid them once more under the blotting-paper.

Mrs. Lockwood's observant eyes had perceived that one of them bore the heading of a fashionable milliner's establishment.

“I am sorry,” she said, “to interrupt the calculation of your wife's bonnet bills; but I really must intrude my prosaic business on your notice.”

“What a bitter little weed you are, Zillah!”



rejoined Mr. Frost, leaning back in his chair, and regarding her thoughtfully.

"*You* have no right to say so."

"The best right; for I know you. I don't complain——"

"Oh! you don't complain!" she echoed, with a short soft laugh.

"No," he proceeded; "I do not complain that your tongue is steeped in wormwood sometimes; for I know that you have not found life full of honey. Neither have I, Zillah. If you knew my anxieties, my sleepless nights, my—— But you would not believe me, even if I had time and inclination to talk about myself. What is it that you want with me this morning?"

"I want my money."

"Have you come here to say that?"

"That's the gist of what I have come to say. I put it crudely, because shortly. But you and I know very well that that is always the burden of the tale."

"Do you expect me to take out a pocket-book full of bank-notes, and hand them to you across the table, like a man in a play? But," he added, after a momentary struggle with his own temper, "it is worse than useless for us to jangle. You are too sensible a woman

to have come here merely for the pleasure of dunning me. Tell me what has induced you to take this step?"

"I desired to speak with you. To the first note I sent you, asking you to call in Gower-street, I got no answer——"

"I was engaged day and night at the time. I meant to come to you as soon as I had an hour's leisure."

"To the second note you replied that you were going out of town for three days."

"It was quite true. I only got back last night."

"And therefore I came here this morning."

"Has anything new happened?"

"Something new is always happening. Hugh is bent on setting up for himself. His father's friends in the country have urged him to do so."

"It would be folly on his part to leave Digby and West for the next year or so. I give this opinion just as I should if I were asked for advice by a perfect stranger. *You* doubtless think that I am actuated by some underhand motive."

"No; I do not think so. And, moreover, I should agree with you in your opinion, if I did not know that Hugh is entitled to a sum

of money which would suffice to make the experiment he contemplates a judicious instead of a rash one."

"I do not see that."

"Hugh, at all events, has the right to judge for himself."

"And you have the right to influence his judgment."

"Sometimes I am tempted—nay, often, very often, I am tempted—to tell Hugh everything, and let him fight his own fight. I am so tired of it!"

"Tell him then!" ejaculated Mr. Frost, impatiently. "I, too, am weary, God knows!"

"You have the power to put an end to your weariness and to my importunities. Do me justice. After all, I am but claiming what is my own."

"It is your own. I know it. I have never sought to deny it. You cannot say that I have."

He rose with a quick, irritable movement from his chair, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, with his back to the empty grate.

"Then why not restore it at once, and end this weary business?"

"Surely you must understand that such a sum is not to be had at a moment's notice!"

"A moment's notice! How many years is it since you promised me that it should be restored as soon as Hugh came of age?"

"I know, I know. But, during this last year or two there have been embarrassments, and—and—difficulties."

Mrs. Lockwood leaned her head on her hand, and looked up at him. "Do you know," she said, slowly, "what I begin to be afraid of? That you have been telling me the truth lately, and that you really are in pecuniary difficulties!"

The blood rushed darkly over the lawyer's face, but he met her look with a smile and an ironical raising of the eyebrows.

"Upon my word," he said, "you are civil—and ingenious! You begin to be 'afraid that I have been telling you the truth!' I presume you have hitherto supposed that I kept your cash in hard, round, yellow sovereigns, locked up in a box, and that I had nothing to do but to take them out whenever I chose, and hand them over to you! I am sorry that I cannot altogether dissipate your apprehensions. I *have* been telling you the truth, but, nevertheless, your money is safe!"

The air of superiority in the man, his voice and bearing, were not without their effect on

Mrs. Lockwood. She faltered a moment. Then she said, "You can at least name some time for a settlement, can you not? Give me some fixed date to look forward to. I have been very patient."

"Look here, Zillah, I have a very advantageous thing in view. It will be highly lucrative, if it comes off as I anticipate. It has been proposed to me to go abroad in the character of legal adviser to a very wealthy and powerful English company, and——"

"To go abroad!"

"Temporarily. For a few months merely. It is a question of obtaining a concession for some important works from the Italian government. If the affair succeeds, I shall be in a position not only to pay you back your own——*that*," he added, watching her face, "is a matter of course in any case—but to advance Hugh's prospects very materially. Will you have a little more patience, and a little more faith, and wait until the winter?"

"Six months?" said Mrs. Lockwood, wearily.

"Yes; six months. Say six months! And meanwhile—— As for Hugh, since he knows nothing, he will be suffering no suspense."

"Hugh? No, thank God! If it had been

a question of subjecting my son instead of myself to the grinding of hope deferred, the matter should have been settled in one way or the other years ago !”

Mr. Frost looked at the small, frail figure before him ; at the pale, delicate-featured face, framed in its soft grey curls ; and he wondered at the strength of resolution to endure that was expressed in every curve of her mouth, in the firmness of her attitude, as she stood with her little nervous hands clasped in front of her, in the steadiness of the dark eyes whose setting was so worn and tear-stained.

“ Good-by, Zillah,” he said, taking her hand ; “ I will come to Gower-street, soon.”

“ Yes ; you had better come. Hugh misses you. He wants to talk to you about his plans, he says.”

“ I shall give him the advice I told you—to stay with Digby and West for at least another year, on the terms they offer. Bless my life, it is no such hardship ! What hurry is there for him to undertake the responsibilities and cares of a professional man who has, or thinks he has,” added Mr. Frost, hastily correcting himself, “ nothing in the world to depend upon but his own exertions ?”

Mrs. Lockwood made as though she were

about to speak, and then checked herself with a little, quick sigh.

"Zillah!" said Mr. Frost, taking again the hand he had relinquished, and bending down to look into her face, "there is something new! You have not told me all that is in your mind."

"Because what is in my mind on this subject is all vague and uncertain. But I fancy—I think—that Hugh has fallen in love."

"Ah, you are like the rest of the women, and put your real meaning into the post-script. I *knew* there was something you had to say."

"I did not mean to say it at all. It is only a surmise——"

"I have considerable faith in the accuracy of your surmises. And it furnishes a likely enough motive for Hugh's hot haste to make himself a place in the world. Can you guess at the woman?"

"I know her. She is a girl of barely eighteen. She lives in my house."

"What! that Lady—Lady——"

"Lady Tallis Gale's niece, Miss Desmond."

"Stay! Where did I hear of her? Oh, I have it! Lovegrove is trustee under her mother's will. She has a mere pittance secured

to her out of the wreck of her father's fortune. Besides, those kind of people, though they may be almost beggars, would, ten to one, look down on your son from the height of their family grandeur. This girl's father was one of the Power-Desmonds, a beggarly, scatter-brained, spendthrift, Irish—gentleman! I dare say the young lady has been taught to be proud of her (probably hypothetical) descent from a savage inferior to a Zulu Kaffir."

"Very likely. But your eloquence is wasted on me. You should talk to Hugh. I'm afraid he has set his heart on this."

"Set his heart! Hugh is—how old? Three-and-twenty?"

"Hugh will be twenty-five in August."

"Ah! Think of a woman of your experience talking of a young fellow of that age having 'set his heart' on anything! No doubt he has 'set his heart.' And how many times will it be set and unset again before he is thirty?"

"God forbid that Hugh should be such a man as some whom my experience has taught me to know!"

"Humph! Just now this love on which Hugh has 'set his heart,' was a mere surmise



on your part. Now you declare it to be a serious and established fact, that 'God forbid' it should not be!"

"When will you come?" asked Mrs. Lockwood, disregarding the sneer.

"I will come to-morrow evening, if *I can*. You know that my time is not mine to dispose of."

"True. But it is sometimes easier to dispose of that which belongs to other people than of one's own rightful property, is it not?"

With this Parthian dart, Mrs. Lockwood disappeared, gliding noiselessly out of the small room, through the next chamber, and acknowledging by a modest, quiet, little bend of the head the respectful alacrity of the clerk who had first admitted her, in rising to open the door for her exit.

## CHAPTER IV.

## ZILLAH'S STORY.

THE widow's reflections as she thought over her interview with Mr. Frost were bitter enough.

Her situation was that of one who, in endeavouring to reach a wished-for goal, has chosen the speciously green path over a morass, rather than the tedious stony way, which, although painful, would have been safe. Now, the treacherous bog quaked beneath her faltering feet. But it was vain to look back. She *must* proceed. To go forward with a step at once firm and light was, she felt, her only chance of safety. And it was but a chance.

Years ago, when Zillah Lockwood was a young woman and a newly-married wife, Sidney Frost had—through the knowledge of certain passages in her life which he had

gained accidentally—come to have a secret power and influence over her.

He had used his knowledge at first to protect her against the persecutions of a ruffian, and in so doing he had acted disinterestedly. Afterwards he was tempted by circumstances, to avail himself of the power he held over Zillah Lockwood, in order to help himself forward in the world.

The case stood thus :

Robert Lockwood and Sidney Frost were early and intimate friends. When the former married Miss Zillah Fenton—a governess in the family of a rich merchant, named Blythe, who liked pictures, and sought the society of the painters of pictures—Frost had still been cordially welcomed at his friend's house.

Miss Fenton was an orphan, without a relation in the world. Her early life had been passed in Paris ; and Mrs. Blythe said she had reason to believe that her father, Captain Fenton, had been a needy adventurer of disreputable character. But against the young lady, no one had a word to say.

At first the young couple were entirely happy. To the day of his death, Robert Lockwood adored his wife. He believed in her with the most absolute trust. He admired her talents. He was guided by her advice.

But when, within a few months of their marriage, Zillah became melancholy, nervous, and silent, Robert was painfully puzzled to account for the change in her. She declared herself to be quite well; but her husband insisted on her seeing doctor after doctor, in the hope of discovering some cure for the unaccountable depression of spirits under which she was suffering.

It was all in vain, however. Robert was in despair; and seriously contemplating sacrificing his connexion and daily-rising reputation as an artist, in order to take his wife abroad, for total change of air and scene.

A mere chance, connected with his professional business, gave Sidney Frost a clue to the cause of the mysterious malady under which his friend's wife was pining. The clue was furnished by a few words dropped by a man of very vile character, a professional blackleg, who had come to London for a time to escape the too vigilant attention of the Parisian police, and from whose clutches Mr. Frost was endeavouring to extricate a foolish young scapegrace, the son of one of his clients.

His professional and natural acuteness enabled Sidney to make a shrewd guess at the real state of the case. He surprised Zillah

one day, when her husband was absent at his studio, into a confession that she knew this man. And after a little gentle cross-examination, the trembling woman burst into tears and revealed the whole story.

Zillah's motherless youth had been passed in Paris, in the home of a father for whom it was impossible for her to feel either affection or respect. His associates were either men of his own character, or young scions of rich or noble houses, who frequented Fenton's shabby, tawdry little salon for the purpose of enjoying the excitement of high play.

Amidst such surroundings Zillah grew to be sixteen: little more than a child in years, but a woman in one sad and sordid phase of world's lore. Her notions of right and wrong were solely derived from her own untutored instincts. These were, in the main, good and pure. But she was ignorant, uncared-for, motherless—and she fell.

Coarse appeals to vanity or greed would have been powerless on Zillah. But the poor child was unable to resist the impulses of an undisciplined heart. She scarcely, even, conceived that it behoved her to resist them.

She believed the passionate protestations of love—protestations not wholly insincere when uttered—of a noble gentleman whom

she looked up to as the ideal of everything splendid and heroic.

The story was trite. Its dénouement was trite also, save in one particular. This one exceptional particular was the unexpected and absurdly unreasonable despair of Zillah, when she perceived that her god was an idol of clay; that he had ceased to love her: and when he informed her, with a good deal of well-bred dexterity, that he was about to make a marriage de convenance at the urgent solicitation of his noble family, he was quite amazed at the girl's violence. He was willing to behave handsomely. But when Zillah started away in horror from his offers of money, like one who suddenly sees the flat cruel head of a snake rear itself from a flower he has been caressing, M. le Vicomte was really shocked. In what Fool's Paradise had the girl been living, to give herself such mock-heroic airs? The daughter of le vieux Fenton! Que diable! His lordship began to look on himself as a victim, and to pity himself a good deal; which state of mind had the desirable effect of quenching the pity for *her*, which the girl's pale passionate face and streaming eyes had aroused to a quite uncomfortable degree.

Then came a second blow. Captain Fenton

was willing to receive his daughter back again, but on conditions against which the girl's whole nature rose up in revolt. He had discovered that his daughter was attractive. Why should she not assist him in that Devil's recruiting service, which he still carried on zealously, but with very fluctuating success?

In brief, to return to her father's home, would be to plunge into a black gulf of shame. Zillah told herself that she was desperate; that she cared not what became of her; but from her father and her father's associates she shrank with a shuddering, invincible repulsion.

Then the extraordinary reserve force of courage and endurance with which nature had endowed the girl, made itself felt. She was eighteen years old, alone in Paris, and almost penniless. But she struggled like a strong swimmer buffeting the waves. She thought that she wished to die; that the waters should close over her wretched head, and let her be at rest. But her youthful vigorous limbs struck out, as it were, involuntarily.

Then, one watching on the shore, stretched out—not a hand, not a warm, comforting human clasp, but—a staff, to her aid. A dry

hard stick was held to her, and she clasped it. It was something to cling to. A woman who knew her history, engaged Zillah to attend on her children, and to teach them English.

For five years the poor girl was a drudge whose physical fatigues and privations were the lightest and least regarded part of her sufferings. But she pursued her solitary way inflexibly. In teaching she learned. She worked with amazing industry, to qualify herself for a better position: and she succeeded. Her blameless life and unwearying activity had softened even her mistress's dry heart towards her; and when *Meess Fenton* left her employment, this woman gave her such recommendations as procured for her a situation in England. From that time, her worldly prospects seemed clear and tranquil.

After a year or two, she had known Robert Lockwood, and the world was changed for her.

"I loved him so!" said Zillah, sobbing, to Sidney Frost. "I had thought I should never love any human being more, and that men were all false, sensual, and selfish. But he came to me like God's sunshine after the long black winter. I felt young again, I who had



deemed myself old at five-and-twenty. I ought to have told him all my miserable story. I had many a struggle with my conscience about it. But—but—Robert honoured me so highly. He had such an exalted ideal of what a woman ought to be. I was a coward. I *dared* not risk losing him. I had been so unhappy, so unhappy! I think none but a woman can understand what I had suffered. And here was a glimpse of Paradise. Was I to speak the word which might bar me out for ever, back into the desolate cold to die? I *could* not do it. I thought 'when we are married, when he has learned to believe in my great love for him, and to trust me as his faithful wife, I will kneel down, and hide my face on his knees, and tell him.' But as I learned to know him better, I found what a fatal mistake I had made, in delaying my confession. You know Robert. He says that he could never again trust any one who had once deceived him. The first time he said so, a knife went into my heart. Oh, if I had but told him at first, he *might* have pitied, and forgiven, and loved me! For, God knows, I was more sinned against than sinning. I was but sixteen. Think of it! Sixteen years old! Well, this concealment bore bitter fruit.

My father has been dead three years, but recently one of his old associates, the man you have been speaking of, came to London, found me out, and came to me for assistance ; being always, as all his kind are, either flush of money or a beggar. My horror at sight of him ; my dread lest Robert, who was at the studio, should return and find him, showed him, I suppose, what hold he had upon me. From soliciting alms, he came to demanding money like a highwayman. I gave him what I could. Since then he has persecuted me, until life is almost unendurable. I see Robert's anxiety, I am tormented for him. But I *dare* not tell the truth. This wretch threatens me, if I do not comply with his demands, that he will tell my proud English husband all the history of my youth. You, who know something of the man, can conjecture in what a hideous light he would put the facts he has to relate. If Robert were to spurn me and despise me, I should die. Oh, I am afraid ! It is so horrible to be afraid !”

Sidney listened sympathetically. He was (as is not uncommon) better than his creed, which was already a somewhat cynical one. He soothed and encouraged Mrs. Lockwood ; promised to rid her of the scoundrel for ever ;

and adroitly said a word or two to the effect that she had better not trouble her husband with so annoying and contemptible a matter.

"I know Robert very well," said he, "and I am sure he would not rest until he had thrashed our French friend soundly. Now a kicking more or less in his life would not matter to *him* at all. It would put Robert in the wrong, too, and distress you. I undertake to punish the miscreant much more effectually."

How he managed to get rid of her tormentor, Zillah never certainly knew; but the man dropped out of her life never to reappear in it.

Sidney Frost was actuated chiefly by motives of kindness towards the Lockwoods. Whatever this woman's past might have been, she made his friend a good wife. Robert idolised her. He was happy in his unfaltering faith in her. But he would not have been able to be happy, had his faith once been shaken. That was the nature of the man. Frost would serve both husband and wife, and would keep his own counsel.

Added to all these considerations, there was another incentive influencing his conduct: the professional zest, namely, with which he

contemplated baulking a rascal's schemes—a zest quite as far removed from any consideration of abstract right and wrong, as the eagerness of a foxhunter is removed from moral indignation against the thievish propensities of the fox.

The two years that ensued were the happiest Zillah had ever known, or was fated to know. She was the joyful mother of a son. Her husband's fame and fortune rose day by day. Sidney Frost never reminded her of the secret they shared between them by word or look. And she had grown almost to regard the days of her misery and degradation as something unreal, like the remembrance of a bad dream.

But a change was at hand.

Robert Lockwood fell ill. His was not a rapid alarming disorder, but a slow wasting away, as it seemed. A short time before his health began to fail, he had yielded to the urgent solicitation of his friend Sidney Frost, and had confided to the latter a large sum of money—the savings of his life—to be invested in certain speculations which Sidney guaranteed to be highly flourishing. And as has been previously stated, Sidney in accepting the trust, honestly meant to fulfil it with a single-minded view to his friend's advantage.

Then came temptation : a combination of temptations. He needed a large sum to complete the amount necessary for the purchase of a share in a flourishing legal business. On his obtaining the share, depended his marriage with a woman whom he passionately loved. He used the greater portion of Lockwood's money for this purpose. He described the transaction to himself thus : "Robert shall find this a better investment than any I proposed to him. The business is as safe as the Bank of England. With an infusion of skill and energy such as I can bring to it, wealth and great wealth, is absolutely certain. I borrow Robert's money at handsomer interest than he could easily obtain in any other way !"

All the while he was desperately ashamed and troubled in his inmost heart.

Zillah had been told by her husband of his having confided his money to Frost. She had almost as undoubting faith in their friend as Robert had. But she asked, "You have a formal acknowledgment for the money, of course ?"

"He wrote me some kind of receipt, or I O U. I don't think it is what you call a 'formal acknowledgment,' little wife. But from Sidney it is sufficient."

"You will keep it carefully, dear Robert ?"

"Oh, yes; of course."

"Because, you know, if Mr. Frost were to—to die!"

Zillah's quick intelligence discovered that something was wrong with Sidney after he had undertaken her husband's trust. He kept away from their house more than had been his wont. He was going to be married. He had obtained his long-coveted partnership. A suspicion of the truth darted into her mind. She endeavoured to take him off his guard by adroit questioning. But her woman's cunning was no match for Sidney Frost.

He confronted the matter boldly and with outward coolness, although he inwardly writhed with mortification to be abased before this woman who had been so humbly grateful at his feet. He told Zillah how he had applied her husband's money.

"It is not exactly the investment I had proposed, but it will be, in the end, a far better one than any other, for you all. I have not mentioned my change of plan to Robert. He is not well enough to be bothered about business. He is the best-hearted, dearest fellow in the world; but *you know* that it is sometimes necessary to hoodwink him for his own good."

At the word, the hot blood rushed to Zillah's

face, and her temples throbbed painfully. She understood perfectly the kind of bargain that was being made. She reflected that her first deception was now bearing its legitimate fruit.

She was helpless. She carefully locked Mr. Frost's informal receipt into her writing-desk, and submitted in silence.

"When Robert gets better," she said to herself, "I *will* summon resolution to tell him everything. I *will*."

But Robert never got better; and within a few months he was laid in his grave.

## CHAPTER V.

## A MORNING CALL.

MR. FROST drove home to Bayswater after business hours, on the day on which Mrs. Lockwood had visited him, very weary in body and sick at heart.

Mrs. Frost had the most stylish of tiny broughams, drawn by a pawing steed, whose action gave one the idea that it had been taught to dance on hot iron, like a bear.

Mr. Frost used a street cab when he drove at all. Very often he returned home on foot. On this special afternoon, he was thoroughly tired. He had been into the City, into offices wherein his partner would have been much amazed to see him, and on business of which that partner had not the faintest suspicion.

As the cab jingled and rattled along the busy streets towards Bayswater, Mr. Frost leaned his head back against the frowsy cushion



and closed his eyes. But he could not deaden his hot brain. That was alive, and feverishly active. He ground his teeth when he thought of Zillah Lockwood. And yet he pitied her.

"If I could coin my blood into guineas she should have her own," said he, mentally.

But if Mr. Frost could have coined his blood into guineas—in one sense he did coin flesh, and blood, and health, and life into lucre—it is probable that still Mrs. Lockwood would not have had her own. For, Mrs. Frost had an insatiable appetite for guineas, and would have received any amount of them with the greedy immobility of a gaping-mouthed Indian idol.

She was an idol that had cost her husband dear, and yet he still worshipped her: worshipped her and did not respect her! Like the poor savage of the south, who alternately rails at, and grovels before, his tawdry Madonna.

Georgina Frost was a magnificently beautiful woman. Her face and figure were noble and majestic. She was graceful, elegant, dignified.

"Mrs. Frost looks every inch a duchess," some one said, admiringly. But Mrs. Frost had once stood for ten minutes side by side

with a real duchess at a picture show, and after that she told her husband, with a superb, languid smile, that she should decline to be likened to a duchess any more.

"A little, skinny, painted, flaxen-haired creature in a short gown, and with the most atrocious bonnet that ever was perched on a human head," said Mrs. Frost, disdainfully. "I am not at all like a duchess, if *she* is a fair specimen of the genus!"

But nevertheless Mrs. Frost was pleased to be likened to a duchess.

Mr. Frost did not reach his home until a few minutes before seven. Seven o'clock was his dinner hour.

"Dinner ready?" he asked of the man who opened the door to him.

"Whenever you please, sir. Shall I tell the cook to send it up at once?"

"Where is your mistress?"

"My mistress is dressing, sir. She had an early dinner at three o'clock."

Mr. Frost walked into the dining-room, bidding the man send up his dinner directly. He threw himself into a chair, and sat still, with a gloomy face. The complex lines in his forehead were twisted and knotted tightly together.

He had got half way through his solitary repast, eating little, but drinking a good deal in a feverish way, when the door opened, and his wife came into the room.

She was in full evening costume. A rich silk dress, of the brownish-golden hue of ripe wheat, enhanced the clear paleness of her skin. The dress was simple and ample, as became the majestic figure of its wearer. Its only ornament was a trimming of white lace round the sleeves and bosom; but this lace was antique, and of the costliest. In her dark wavy hair she had placed a branch of crimson pomegranate flowers, and on one marble-white arm she wore a broad thick band of gold with a magnificent opal set in the midst of it.

"Ah, you are there, Sidney!" she said, no looking at him though, but walking straight towards a large mirror over the mantelpiece. She stood there, with her back to her husband contemplating her own image very calmly.

He raised his eyes and stealthily looked at her in the glass.

"Where are you going?" he asked, surlily. "You told me nothing about going out this evening."

"Oh yes, I did; but I might as well have omitted it. You never remember. I an

going to the opera. Patti sings the *Sonnambula*, and the Maxwells made me promise not to fail them."

Mr. Frost sat looking at his beautiful wife with a strange expression of mingled discontent and admiration.

Suddenly his face changed. "Turn round," he said, sharply. She obeyed leisurely.

"Let me look. Is it possible? Yes; you *have*—you *have*—taken that bracelet, despite all I said to you!"

"I told you when the man showed it to me that I must have it. It is the finest single opal I ever saw."

Mr. Frost dashed his hand down on the table with an oath. "By Heaven it is too bad!" he cried. "It is incredible! Georgina, I wonder, upon my soul I do, that you can have the heart to go on in this way!"

Mrs. Frost looked down at him with a slow Juno-like turn of the throat.

"Don't be silly, Sidney. What is the use of your getting into passions? Nothing would go, either with this dress or my black velvet, but opals. And this matches the earrings so well."

"And how, pray, do you imagine I am to pay for this jewel?"

Mrs. Frost shrugged her shoulders.

"How should I know? How you are to pay for it, is *your* business, not mine! When you married me, I suppose you were aware of the responsibilities you were undertaking! Oh, is the carriage there? Tell him to drive first to Lady Maxwell's, Edward. And—ask my maid for the ermine cloak to put into the carriage in case I should want it coming home."

He walked angrily up and down the room after she was gone; breaking out now and again into half uttered sentences and ejaculations.

"I will not stand it: I *will not*. Heavens and earth! To think of her coolly taking that opal whose fellow it would be difficult to find in London, as though it were a glass bead! She cares no more for me, than for the stone pavement she sets her dainty foot on! I am a money-machine. That's all! But it shall come to an end. I cannot live so. I *will not*. Why should I grind my very soul out for a woman with no vestige of heart or feeling? I'll send her to live in the country. I'll sell her wardrobe by auction. Millions wouldn't suffice for her extravagance. I have told her that I don't know which way to turn.

for money—and people think me a rich man ! Well they may when they see my wife decked out in finery worth a king's ransom. Good Heavens, that opal ! To-morrow I will make the jeweller take it back. She shall not keep it. It is too monstrous."

The next day, Mrs. Frost, who occasionally made small concessions that cost her nothing, when it became apparent that she had roused her husband's indignation too far, offered to drive with him to Bedford-square and call on Mrs. Lovegrove.

As they drove along eastward—Mrs. Frost looking very lovely in a morning toilet, for the perfection of whose freshness and simplicity she had paid more to a fashionable milliner than Mrs. Lovegrove had ever expended on her finest gown—Mr. Frost lectured his wife as to the necessity of comporting herself with civility towards the Lovegroves.

"I'm sure I don't know how to conciliate Mrs. Lovegrove," said the fair Georgina. "Unless, perhaps, by rigging myself out from top to toe in Tottenham-court-road, and arriving at her door in the dirtiest hackney cab to be found ! I really would have borrowed Davis's bonnet and shawl to come in, if I had thought of it : only, to be sure, Davis is always three

months nearer the fashion than the Lovegrove women !”

Davis was Mrs. Frost’s cook.

Mr. Frost went into his office, saying that he would open his letters and go up to pay his respects to Mrs. Lovegrove by-and-bye. His wife was ushered into the drawing-room and waited while her card was carried to the mistress of the house.

Mrs. Lovegrove’s drawing-room was hot. The sun shone full in through the windows and there was a large fire in the grate. There was a stuffy fragrance in the room from two enormous jars of pot-pourri which stood one on each side of a gilt cabinet. On the cabinet were ranged what Mrs. Lovegrove called her knick-knacks : namely, a huge dish of wax fruit under a glass cover ; some Dresden figures ; a Chinese puzzle ; a Swiss chalet in cardboard ; two or three cups of egg-shell porcelain ; a statuette in the so-called Parian ware, representing a Spanish lady clothed entirely in lace flounces, and with a foot about the same length as her nose ; and a blue satin box worked with white beads.

The furniture was drab, with red satin stripes in it. The curtains were the same. The carpet was also drab, with splotchy cabbage-rose

strewn over it. On the mantelpiece stood a French clock, flanked on either side by a cut-glass lustre, whose pendant prisms jingled and shook whenever a foot crossed the floor. There was a grand piano in the room, dark and shining. There was also a harp, muffled up in brown holland. On the round centre table, covered by a red velvet cloth, were disposed with geometrical accuracy several books. The middle of the table was occupied by a silver card-basket full of visiting cards, on the top of which was conspicuously displayed a large ticket setting forth that General Sir Thomas Dobbs and Lady Dobbs requested the honour of Mrs. and Misses Lovegrove's company at a ball, bearing date two months back.

Mrs. Frost waited. The house was very still. She peeped into one book after the other. Two were photograph albums. A third was a little volume of poetry containing verses in celebration of the month of May, which the Puseyite writer looked on exclusively from an ecclesiastical point of view, and styled the "Month of Mary." There was likewise a Peerage, bound in red and gold.

Mrs. Frost waited. She had ensconced herself in a comfortable corner of the couch. It was hot, and the end of it was that Mrs. Frost



fell into a doze, and woke with a sensation of being looked at.

Mrs. Lovegrove stood opposite to her.

Mrs. Lovegrove had a pale, smooth face with a pale, smooth, and very high forehead. Her features were not uncomely. Her eyes must have been pretty in youth; well-shaped and of a soft-dove grey. Her teeth were still sound and white. They projected a little, and her upper lip was too long for beauty. It gave one the idea, when her mouth was closed, of being stretched too tightly, in the effort to cover the long prominent teeth.

Mrs. Lovegrove was lean and flat-chested. She wore a lead-coloured merino gown, and a small cap with lead-coloured satin ribbons. She affected drabs, and browns, and leaden, or iron, greys in her own attire. She said they were "so chaste."

"How do you do, Mrs. Frost? I am so shocked to have kept you waiting. Your visits are such unexpected and rare favours that if I could have come instantly, I would."

Mrs. Lovegrove spoke in a very low voice and with pedantic distinctness.

"I almost fell asleep, I think," said Mrs. Frost, with much nonchalance.

"You were—excuse me—snoring," replied

Mrs. Lovegrove, in her gentlest and most distinct accents.

Mrs. Frost did not at all like to be told that she had been snoring. But as this is an accusation against which we are all helpless, seeing that in the nature of things we cannot be conscious whether we have snored or not, she did not attempt to rebut it.

"Don't you think you keep your room rather—stuffy?" she said, wrinkling up her handsome nose.

"Stuffy? If I apprehend your meaning, I think *not*. You see, you live in one of those new lath-and-plaster houses that really are barely weather-proof. No doubt you find some compensating advantage in doing so. But I confess that for myself, I prefer a solid, well-built, old-fashioned mansion. How is Mr. Frost?"

"Quite well, I believe. He said he was coming to wait upon you by-and-bye."

"*Is* he quite well? Now *is* he? I am rejoiced to hear it. Mr. Lovegrove has been thinking him looking rather fagged of late. We live in high-pressure times. The friction on a railway, for instance, is so much more tremendous than the friction on an old mail-

coach road. And yet it may be doubted——  
Is anything the matter?"

"No: I—I—only want to sneeze. How very pungent the stuff in those jars is! You don't put snuff in it, do you?"

"Snuff! My dear Mrs. Frost——!"

"I feel as though I had some grains of snuff up my nose."

"My pot-pourri is prepared after a recipe that was always used down at our family place."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Frost, languidly. "I dare say it is very nice when one gets a little—seasoned to it."

Then Mrs. Lovegrove led the conversation into her own ground. She discoursed of ritualism, of stoles, tapers, and censers. After these subjects came the British aristocracy, collectively and individually. Thence she slid easily to the immense number of invitations her girls had received this season. Finally, reserving her *bonne bouche* to the last, she spoke of their dear young friend, Miss Desmond, Lady Tallis Gale's niece, and herself connected with some of our most ancient families.

"I am no leveller," said Mrs. Lovegrove, in a kind of self-denying way (as who should

say, "If I did but choose it, I could lay existing institutions as flat as a bowling-green!"). "No. I approve and reverence the distinctions of rank and birth. You may tell me that these are inborn prejudices——"

"Not at all," drawled Mrs. Frost, checking, but not concealing, a yawn.

"Well, I will not deny that there *may* be some tinge of early prejudice. But when we lived at our family place, papa always impressed on us to pay the same respect to those few persons who were above us in rank as we exacted from our inferiors. Papa was a staunch Tory of the old school. But he had no arrogant pride of birth. He used to say—— Ah, here is Mr. Frost. *How* do you do, Mr. Frost? We were speaking—or, at least, *I* was speaking, for I do not think your wife knows her—of our dear Miss Desmond. You cannot think how the girls have taken to her. She is not here half as much as we could wish though. For her attendance on Lady Tallis is most unremitting. But we feel towards her as a daughter. As to my son, Augustus——! Well, do you know, I scarcely know how to describe the impression the sweet girl has made on Augustus!"

Mr. Frost smiled very graciously, and seemed much interested.

"We are going to have, I won't call it a party, a little social gathering, to which we have persuaded Miss Desmond to come, on the Feast of Saint Werewolf—that is," added Mrs. Lovegrove, with a melancholy smile, "next Saturday. I dare say you are not familiar with the saints' days?"

"I don't know anything about Saint Werewolf," said Mrs. Frost.

"We shall have music, and endeavour to be innocently gay; none the less gay for having attended a matin service in honour of the saint. Our religion is not gloomy and mirth-forbidding. If you and Mrs. Frost would join us we should be unaffectedly glad."

Mrs. Frost had opened her mouth to decline the invitation, but her husband interposed.

"You are extremely good, Mrs. Lovegrove," he said. "We will come with pleasure."

"Why in the world did you say yes to that oppressive woman's invitation, Sidney?" asked his wife, as he was handing her into her carriage. "*I* shan't go. She really is too much. If you had heard the stuff she was talking

about her family place! And she devoured me with her fishy eyes. If I had not had the consciousness of being thoroughly well dressed she would have given me a nervous fever."

"Well, that consciousness must support you on Saturday next. For we *must* go. And—listen, Georgy—make yourself pleasant to Miss Desmond."

## CHAPTER VI.

## CORRESPONDENCE.

THREE letters from abroad had come to the vicarage. Mr. Levincourt burnt them all, and said no word of them to any one.

One evening, when Mr. Plew returned from a round of professional visits, his mother put into his hand a large letter covered with foreign postmarks.

"Of course, Nathaniel," said the poor old woman, tremblingly watching his face, "I guess who it's from. But you would have nothing to say to her now, my deary, would you?"

"Mother!" gasped the little surgeon, clutching at the letter.

"There, there, Nathaniel, don't be angry with me, love. I have never said a wry word about the girl at home nor abroad; nor I don't want to. But—of course I know you

are a grown man" (Mr. Plew was three-and-forty) "and can act for yourself; but you know, Nathaniel, love, I'm the mother that bore you, and in some ways you'll always be a child to me—aye, if you were a hundred! And it goes to my heart to see you badly treated by them that ain't worthy to—— There, my deary, I've done."

Mr. Plew shut himself up in his little bedroom, and opened his letter.

His face, eager, anxious, all aglow with excitement, fell, and the light faded out of it. The bulky packet contained a sealed letter addressed to "Miss Maud Desmond." Within the outer envelope were written these words:

"I rely on you to convey the enclosed into Maud's hands. I think you will not fail me.

"V."

Mr. Plew opened his shabby little writing-desk, took out a sheet of paper, wrapped the letter in it, sealed it, and directed it to Miss Desmond, No. 367, Gower-street, London.

Then he pressed the outer envelope to his lips, flushing a hot, painful crimson as he did so, and, finally, he sat down beside the bed, hid his face on the pillow, and cried.



The next day Maud received her letter. It ran as follows :

“I will begin with a warning. I warn you not to waste compassion and wailings and lamentations upon me. I desire, and need, no pity. I have chosen my fate, and the day may come, *will* come, when you will all acknowledge that I have chosen wisely. I have written to you once before, and twice to papa. Having received no answer, the idea occurred to me that papa had suppressed mine to you. I know the kind of twaddle—contamination, evil communications—must hold no parley with—I will not write the trash. It cannot apply to *me*. Believe that.

“It may be, on the other hand, that you *have* received my letter, and have chosen to make no sign. If it be so, so be it. But I give you this chance, by directing the present letter to the care of Mr. Plew. I believe him to be a faithful creature, and I hope that Sir John and myself may one day have it in our power to show him that we think so.”

The words “Sir John and myself” made Maud recoil, when she read them, as though she had received a physical blow. The letter proceeded :

“You will, of course, be taught to think all evil of me. I know the paltry, envious malice of a place like Shipley. How I loathe the name of it! And it is, no doubt, true that I caused papa some temporary anxiety. I trust it was brief. I left the letter on my toilet-table, and I conjectured that it could not long remain unseen. The letter, when once read, ought to have reassured him. Sir John gave me weighty reasons for not wishing to make our marriage public at once. I was bound to respect his secret. From the fact of papa having preserved an obstinate silence, I am led to guess that he is nourishing resentment against me. I shall be sorry if this be so, but can stoop to no more entreaties.

“The knowledge of the position I shall one day hold in the eyes of all the world sustains me against the idea of passing misconstruction.

“Sir John is all kindness and consideration to me. I am surrounded by all the elegant luxuries that wealth can purchase, or watchful affection suggest. I am travelling through exquisite scenery, and drawing near to my mother’s native sunny land. I hate affectation of sentimentality, but, in truth, my heart beats faster as I look at the snowy peaks and think ‘beyond there lies Italy!’ Direct to

me, Post Restante, Arona, Lago Maggiore. Within a fortnight we shall be there. *Your letter must be addressed to Lady Gale.*

“Your affectionate (if you will let it be so) VERONICA.

“Maudie, Maudie, tell me how papa is, how you are. Love me, Maudie.

“V.”

The last few words were apparently added hurriedly. They were blurred and almost illegible. But Maud dwelt on them rather than on the rest of the letter. They showed that Veronica's heart was not dead, although her haughty spirit disdained sympathy or compassion.

Twice, thrice, four times, did Maud read the letter through her blinding tears, before she laid it down on her lap, and fairly thought over its contents.

One conviction stood out clear in her mind—either Veronica was deceived or deceiving.

That she could have no right to the title of “Lady Gale” they in England knew but too well. But was it equally certain that Veronica knew it? Was it not much more probable that Sir John was continuing to deceive her? Might he not even have gone through

a false ceremony of marriage? Such things had been.

Maud pondered and pondered. Suddenly she took a resolution. Come what might she would answer Veronica's letter. It could not be right to leave her in ignorance of the real facts of the case. She would write to Veronica, and would then enclose Veronica's letter to Mr. Levincourt, and tell him what she had done. He might be angry at first, but in his heart he would thank her. He could not really desire to abandon his only child to shame and misery. If Veronica could only know the truth she would leave that wicked man—she *must*!

Maud peeped into the drawing-room before sitting down to her little desk in her own room.

Lady Tallis was asleep on the sofa. She always slept regularly after her early dinner, and with equal regularity was always very much surprised when she awoke to find that she had "dropped off," as she phrased it.

Without allowing herself time to hesitate, Maud wrote a letter earnestly and affectionately conjuring the unfortunate girl to return to them, telling her, with simple directness, that Sir John Tallis Gale had a wife living, and

who that wife was ; imploring her to disbelieve any specious tale he might tell her, and to wrench herself away from him at any cost. "If you will only believe in the true love of your friends, dear Veronica," she wrote, "and come back to us, you shall never repent it."

Who the friends were whose love Veronica was conjured to believe in was not so clear. Maud secretly feared that Mr. Levincourt would be obdurate for a time. But he could not harden his heart against a repentant child for ever. Then she thought of the Shear-downs, and believed that they would be kind and charitable. They might assist Mr. Levincourt to leave Shipley, and to go elsewhere—to some place in which his daughter's story was not known. Fifty plans passed through Maud's brain, as her pen ran swiftly, eagerly over the paper. She wrote with all the eloquence she could.

Would Veronica be willing to return even when she knew the truth? Did she assuredly not know it already? On these questions Maud would not dwell, although they kept presenting themselves importunately to her mind. Her one plain, obvious duty was to tell Veronica the truth. How might not the lost girl one day reproach them all if they left

her in ignorance—if they did not stretch out a hand to rescue and reclaim her!

“I do love you, Veronica,” she wrote at the end of her letter. “And so does Uncle Charles. You would not think him hard if you had seen him as I saw him on that dreadful day when we lost you. Oh, come back, come back to us! If you want means, or help, or protection, you *shall have them*, I swear that you shall! Write to me here. I am with my Aunt Hilda. She knows nothing of this letter, nor of yours to me. Do not let false shame or false pride keep you apart from us. Be strong. Oh look forward a little, dearest Veronica! Is not anything better than—— But I know your heart is good; you will not let your father die without the consolation of knowing that you are safe, and that you have given up that wicked tempter so soon as you knew his real character. There is no disgrace in being deceived, and I know, I am *sure*, he has deceived you. Write to me, Veronica, soon, soon!”

The letter was sealed, directed (not without a pang of conscience at the written lie) to “Lady Gale,” and despatched to the post office, at the same time with a few lines to Mr. Levin-court, enclosing Veronica’s letter, begging him

to read it, and telling him what she (Maud) had done.

To this latter epistle came an answer within a few days.

“I cannot be angry with you, my sweet child,” wrote the vicar, “but I am grieved that you should have followed this impulse without consulting me. It is my duty, Maud, to guard you from contact with such as that wretched girl has made herself. The hardened audacity of her letter astounds me. If such things could be, I should believe that that fiend had cast a spell upon her. May God Almighty forgive her. I struggle with myself, but I am a broken man. I cannot hold up my head here. Blessed are the peace-makers, Maudie. You plead for her with sweet charity. But she has not injured you—she has injured no one as she has injured *me*. Still, I will not shut my mind against any ray of hope. It *may* be, as you say, that she has been deceived. If this be so, and she returns humbled and repentant—repentant for all the evil her treachery and deceit have heaped on *me*, we must crawl into some obscure corner and hide our shame together. At the best, she is branded and disgraced for life. But, my pure-hearted Maud, I warn you not to be sanguine. Do

not make sure that she will abandon her wicked luxuries, and pomps, and wealth, to live in decent, dull poverty with me. I can send no message to your aunt. My name must be loathsome in her ears. It were better for her and you to forget us altogether."

The tone of this letter was softer than Maud had dared to hope. Here, at least, he showed no stubborn wrath. It now remained to see what answer her letter to Arona would bring forth.

She waited eagerly, anxiously, fearfully, despondingly ; but no answer ever came.

Her poor letter had been forwarded from Arona to Milan in accordance with the written instructions of Sir John Gale (he having changed his plans, and gone on to Milan sooner than had been arranged), had been opened by him, read by him, and burnt by him in the flame of a taper in his bedroom, until it was browner and more shrivelled than an autumn leaf.



## CHAPTER VII.

## A FEW FRIENDS.

BEFORE the receipt of the letter from Italy Maud had promised to go to Mrs. Lovegrove's party.

She wished, after she had got the letter, to withdraw her promise. She was anxious, agitated, ill at ease. She dreaded meeting strangers. And although the women of Mr. Lovegrove's family had been kind and civil to her, they were not people whose society was at all congenial to her.

She had hitherto had no experience of town vulgarity. The poor peasants at Shipley were rough and ignorant. But that was different from the Cockney gentility which some of the Lovegroves assumed. The young man, Augustus, was peculiarly distasteful to her, from an instinctive knowledge she had that he admired herself, and would upon the slightest

encouragement, or, she much feared, without any encouragement at all, avow as much in plain terms. She had yielded to her aunt's urgings, and had consented to go to Mrs. Lovegrove's party, however. But now she much desired to avoid doing so.

"My darling pet!" cried Lady Tallis, when Maud hinted this to her. "Now how can ye think of disappointing the poor woman? 'Twould be unkind, dear. And I have had that poplin turned, it looks beautiful by candle-light—but sure I wouldn't think of going without you, Maud dear."

"O yes, Aunt Hilda! Why not?"

"Not at all, child. I wouldn't dream of it. If you are not feeling well, or anything, we'll just stay at home the two of us. And I'll send a little note to Dr. Talbot."

"Dear aunt, I am quite well. I do not need any doctors."

"Then why in the world now wouldn't ye go to Mrs. Lovegrove's? I don't like to see you moping, a young creature like you. You want rousing a bit. And if you stick at home like an old woman, I shall be quite unhappy."

After this, Maud could no longer resist. She could not make her aunt understand that

the party at Mrs. Lovegrove's could not by any possibility conduce to the raising of her spirits. "But if I am not feeling gay myself," thought Maud, "I will not be so selfish as to cast a damp on poor Aunt Hilda, when she is inclined to be cheerful. It would be cruel to stand in the way of any of her few enjoyments."

So the turned poplin was put on; and Lady Tallis yielded with some reluctance to the modest suggestion of Mrs. Lockwood, who was invited to superintend her ladyship's toilet, that a bow of tartan ribbon at the throat, scarcely harmonised with the pink ribbons in the cap.

"That soft rose-colour goes admirably with the grey poplin, Lady Tallis," said Zillah, quietly. "But, do you know, I am afraid the tartan bow will be a little—a little too conspicuous."

"Do you think so?" said my lady, taking it off with much docility, but with evident disappointment. "Well, to be sure, you have excellent taste. But when I was a girl I always used to be told that tartan went with anything. I remember dancing in a Caledonian quadrille at Delaney once, the time poor James came of age, and we had—myself

and three other girls—white silk dresses, trimmed with the Royal Stuart tartan, and everybody said they looked lovely.”

It took some time to get Lady Tallis dressed; for the ill fortune that attended her outer attire pursued all her garments. Buttons and strings dropped from her clothing like ripe apples from the tree. She would have riddled her clothes with pins, had not Mrs. Lockwood, neat and dexterous, stood by with a needle and thread ready to repair any damage.

“I think a few stitches are better than pins,” observed Zillah. “Don’t you, my lady?”

“O indeed I do! much better. But my dear soul I am shocked to give ye this trouble. When I think that I had, and ought to have at this moment, attendants of my own to wait on me properly, and that I am now obliged to trespass on the kindness of my friends, I assure you I am ready to shed tears. But I won’t give way, and spoil my dear Maud’s pleasure. Don’t ye think I am right in making her go out and enjoy herself?”

Despite the truth of Maud’s assertions that she was ill at ease in spirit, and disinclined to go into the society of strangers, her curiosity

and attention were aroused by the novelty of all she saw and heard at Mrs. Lovegrove's.

This was not like a Shipley tea-drinking with old Mrs. Plew, or a dinner-party at Mrs. Sheardown's or Lady Alicia Renwick's.

She desired and wished to sit still and unnoticed in a corner, and watch the company. But to her dismay, she found it to be Mrs. Lovegrove's intention to draw her into notice.

That lady, clad in a stiff metallic grey silk gown, drew Maud's arm through her own and walked with her, about the drawing-room, into the small room behind it, and even into the third room, a tiny closet above Mr. Frost's private office, where three old gentlemen and one old lady were playing whist at a green table, and glared at the intruders fiercely.

"I wish to make you known to the Dobbses, dearest Miss Desmond," said Mrs. Lovegrove. "Those are the Misses Dobbs, in apple-green. I am so grieved that the General and Lady Dobbs cannot be here to-night. They are charming people. I know you would be delighted with them!"

Maud felt inwardly thankful that the charming Dobbses were not present. She had no desire to form new acquaintances, and after a time she complained of feeling rather tired,

and asked to be allowed to go and sit beside her aunt.

But when she reached Lady Tallis, she found Mr. Augustus Lovegrove, junior, seated close to her ladyship, and talking to her with much vivacity.

Mr. Augustus Lovegrove was very tall, and was awkward in his gait; and carried his head hanging backward, so that when he wore a hat, the hinder part of the brim rested on the collar of his coat; and sometimes sang comic songs to his own accompaniment on the piano-forte; and his friends considered him little inferior to Mr. John Parry. They allowed, indeed, that he had not "quite Parry's touch on the piano. But that was only a knack, you know." His mother called him an excellent son, and the Puseyite clergyman of the church he attended, pronounced him a model to all young men. His little bedroom at the top of the house was stuck over with paltry coloured lithographs of saints, and illuminated texts in Latin. It was rumoured among his sisters that he possessed a rosary which had been blessed by the Pope. He was being brought up to his father's calling, and Mr. Lovegrove, who knew what he was talking about, pronounced that Gussy had a very fair

head for business; and that he understood that two and two make four, quite as well as most people.

"Here she is!" exclaimed Mr. Augustus, as Maud approached. "We were just talking about you, Miss Desmond, my lady and I."

The intimation was not altogether pleasing to Maud. She bowed with rather stiff politeness and sat down next to her aunt.

"I was just saying to my lady," proceeded the gallant Augustus, "that their painted hair has no chance beside yours. They can't get the shine, you know." And he slightly nodded his head in the direction of the Misses Dobbs's apple-green skirts, which were disappearing into the second drawing-room.

Maud felt disgusted, and made no reply.

Lady Tallis, however, raised her eyebrows and inquired with much interest, "Do you, now *do* you think that those young ladies dye their hair?"

"Not the least doubt of it, ma'am. I've known Polly Dobbs ever since I was a small boy. And when she was fifteen, her hair was as brown as a berry. They both came back from the Continent last year with orange-coloured locks. Their mother says it's climate that did it. It's the kind of 'climate' they

sell in the Burlington Arcade at seven-and-six per bottle!"

"Really! You don't say so?" cried Lady Tallis, not more than half understanding him. "Well, I know that you can get the waters—almost any foreign spa-waters—in stone bottles, imported. But of course when you talk of climate in bottles, you're joking."

At this moment, greatly to Maud's relief, for she began to find young Lovegrove intolerable, a duet for harp and piano was commenced: and there was enforced silence among the company.

The players were Miss Lovegrove and Miss Lucy Lovegrove. Miss Phœbe Lovegrove turned over the music for her sister at the harp; and Miss Dora Lovegrove did the same for the pianist. The piece was very long and not particularly well executed. But Maud was sorry when it came to a close, for whilst it continued she could remain quiet and look about her unmolested.

Her eyes were attracted in spite of herself to a magnificently beautiful woman sitting in a nonchalantly graceful posture on a sofa, on the opposite side of the room. She looked so different from all the other persons present, and seemed to regard them with such calm



contempt, that Maud found herself wondering who she could be ; how she came there ; and above all, why having come, she should be uncivil enough to allow her face to express boredom so undisguisedly.

No sooner had the duet come to a close, than this beautiful lady rose, took the arm of a gentleman, and came across the drawing-room to where Lady Tallis and Maud were sitting.

The lady and gentleman were Mrs. and Mr. Frost. The latter bowed profoundly to Lady Tallis, and begged permission to present his wife to her.

"Most happy!—delighted!" said Lady Tallis, holding out her hand. She had seen Mr. Frost in Gower-street very often.

There was no difficulty in making my lady's acquaintance. She began to chat directly, with as much familiarity as though the Frosts had been known to her all her life.

Mrs. Frost appraised her ladyship's attire with a glance, of whose meaning Lady Tallis was happily unconscious.

Mr. Frost furtively watched Maud, and at length, during one of the rare pauses in Lady Tallis's flow of talk, said hesitatingly,—“Your niece, is it not?”

"Indeed and in truth she is my niece, Mr. Frost, and a great blessing and comfort it is to have her with me! Maud, my darling, this is Mrs. Frost. Mr. Frost, Miss Desmond."

Mr. Frost sat down beside the young lady and began to talk to her. He perceived at once that she was very different in every respect from her aunt. It was quite impossible to jump into terms of familiarity with Maud Desmond.

"You have been ill, I was sorry to learn," said Mr. Frost.

"I was a little ill: very slightly. I am quite well now, thank you."

"Perhaps London does not altogether agree with you. You have been used to a country life, have you not?"

"I have lived nearly always in the country. But I am very well in London now."

"You are living in the house of a very old friend of mine, Mrs. Lockwood."

The change in Maud's face from apathy to interest, when he uttered the name, was not lost upon Mr. Frost.

"You are an old friend of Mrs. Lockwood's?" repeated Maud, smiling.

"A very old friend. I knew her husband

before he was married. I have known Hugh ever since he was born. He is a right good fellow."

"Oh yes."

"But his mother is a little disturbed about him at present. He has taken an obstinate fit into his head, and wants to set up as an architect on his own account, instead of remaining longer in Digby and West's offices. Perhaps you have heard?"

"Yes; I heard something of it from Mrs. Lockwood; and from my friends Captain and Mrs. Sheardown."

"Ah, exactly."

"Captain Sheardown seemed to think that Mr. Lockwood was justified in his plan."

"I have no doubt that Captain Sheardown is an excellent gentleman."

"He is very good and very sensible."

"No doubt. Still on this point his opinion is scarcely the most valuable that could be had. I am going to Italy myself in a very short time—— You are looking pale. Is the heat of the room too much for you?"

"No, thank you. Yes—I am rather oppressed by it. You were saying——"

"That I am going to Italy on business which, if carried out successfully, would enable

me to throw an excellent thing in Hugh Lockwood's way. It might keep him abroad for a year or two, but that would be no disadvantage—on the contrary. If we can only persuade Hugh not to be in a hurry to assume responsibilities on his own account."

"The carriage *must* be here by this time, Sidney," said Mrs. Frost, rising and touching her husband's shoulder. "Do inquire!"

"Not going yet, surely!" exclaimed Mrs. Lovegrove with stern distinctness. "*Not* going before partaking of our humble refreshments?"

"O thank you very much," returned Mrs. Frost, "but I really couldn't eat anything. We rushed away from dinner in order to get here before it was all over. Your hours are so virtuously early!"

It was perhaps strange that Mrs. Lovegrove should feel offended at being told that she kept virtuously early hours. But the fact was that she did so feel.

"I saw," said the hostess, "that you had scraped acquaintance with my friend Lady Tallis Gale. I would have presented you to her, but the fact is, she does not particularly care for making acquaintance out of her own set."

"Oh, that talkative elderly lady in the turned gown? Yes; Sidney presented me to her. What an odd person!"

"In her peculiar and painful position," pursued Mrs. Lovegrove, loftily, "Mr. Lovegrove does not feel justified in intruding strangers on her acquaintance."

"What's the matter with her? Is she not quite right in her head?" asked Mrs. Frost, slightly touching her own forehead as she spoke.

This was too much for Mrs. Lovegrove. She had felt that she was getting the worst of it throughout; for she was piqued, and Mrs. Frost was genuinely cool and unconcerned.

"I don't understand you, Mrs. Frost," said Mrs. Lovegrove, "nor can I conjecture why you should wish to—to—insult my friends."

"O dear me, I assure you I hadn't the least idea of insulting the poor woman," rejoined Mrs. Frost, imperturbably. "It would be her misfortune, not her fault, you know, after all! But you said something, yourself, about her peculiar and painful position."

Mrs. Lovegrove faced round solemnly. "I did so, Mrs. Frost," she said. "And poor dear Lady Tallis's position is indeed a sad one. Her husband—a man of enormous wealth, but of so profligate a character that I shudder to

breathe his name in the same atmosphere where my daughters are—her husband,” continued Mrs. Lovegrove, reaching a climax of impressiveness, and lowering her voice almost to a whisper, “*has gone off and deserted her!*”

“Really? Very shocking! But,” added Mrs. Frost, “do you know, I think *not*, on the whole, very surprising!”

That night, in the seclusion of their chamber, Mrs. Lovegrove informed her husband that, come what might, she would never, on any consideration, invite “that woman”—so she designated Mrs. Frost—inside her doors again.

“Pooh, Sarah!” said Mr. Lovegrove, “why not?”

“Why not, Augustus? I wonder that you can ask! Her insolence and airs are beyond bearing. And did you see her gown?”

“A black gown, wasn’t it? It looked very neat, I thought.”

“Very neat! If three guineas a yard paid for that lace it was trimmed with, I will undertake to eat it. That is all, Augustus!”

But yet that proved to be not quite all. And Mr. Lovegrove had to listen to a long catalogue of Mrs. Frost’s misdemeanours until he fell asleep.

Mrs. Frost, on her side, declared that she

had been bored to death ; that she had never seen anything like the collection of creatures Mrs. Lovegrove had gathered together ; that they had stared at her (Mrs. Frost) as though she were a savage : and, finally, she asked her husband what good had been done by her going there at all, seeing that that absurd woman, Mrs. Lovegrove, had chosen to take offence, and walk away from her in a huff !

“ No good at all, Georgina, certainly, unless you had chosen to behave with civility, when you knew how I had begged you to do so.”

“ Really, I was perfectly civil. But Mrs. Lovegrove tried to quarrel with me because I was not overwhelmed by the honour and glory of being introduced to that ridiculous old Irishwoman.”

“ Lady Tallis’s niece is, at all events, a very charming creature.”

“ The golden-haired girl in white ? Well —y—yes, perhaps ; I did not speak to her. Certainly she did look different from the rest of the menagerie. Those apple-green creatures ! Ugh ! They set one’s teeth on edge !”

“ You must call on Lady Tallis, Georgina. I want you to invite the girl, and take her into society a little.”

“ I ? Thanks ! I really cannot undertake

to chaperon all your clients' daughters and nieces and cousins, and Heaven knows who besides."

"Lady Tallis Gale is no client of mine."

"Why do you trouble yourself about her, then?"

"Georgy, listen: this is a case in which your woman's tact might help me, if you would employ it on my behalf. There is some foolish love-making going on between Hugh Lockwood and this Miss Desmond. The girl is very different from what I expected. She is very attractive. Now, it is very undesirable that young Lockwood should entangle himself in an engagement just now."

"Very undesirable for whom?" asked Mrs. Frost, yawning behind her fan.

"For—for his mother."

"Really? Well, I should suppose that very trenchant little person with the prominent jaw, was able to manage her own business. I am sorry I cannot get up any vital interest in the case. But you know Mrs. Lockwood is not a dear old friend of *mine*!"

Mrs. Frost had for a brief time been really a little jealous of Zillah. And she still affected to be so whenever it suited her, although she felt tolerably certain that whatever were the



strong tie of intimacy between her husband and Mrs. Lockwood, there was no echo in it of an old love story.

"Suppose I tell you, Georgina," said Mr. Frost, suppressing the hot words of anger which rose to his lips, "that it would be undesirable for *me* that Hugh Lockwood should engage himself at present."

"What in the world can it matter to you, Sidney?"

"There are business complications in the affair," said Mr. Frost, slowly. "But so long as these young folks are living in the same house and meeting daily, and so long as the young lady is mewed up there without any other society, it is in the course of nature that she should be disposed to fancy herself in love with Hugh. As to him, I am not surprised. The girl is full of sense and sweetness, and is a thorough gentlewoman. But Hugh ought to marry some one with a few thousands of her own. Miss Desmond is very poor. Now, if you would give her some pleasant society, and let her see something of the world, there would be less fear of Hugh and her making fools of themselves."

"Why don't you tell all that to Lady What's-her-name?" asked Mrs. Frost, leaning

back in the carriage with closed eyes. "She is the proper person to look after her niece."

"I tell it to you because I choose that you shall obey me!" thundered Mr. Frost, furiously. "It is not enough that you drive me half wild by your extravagance; that you have neither common gratitude nor common consideration for your husband; but you thwart me at every turn. You deliberately put yourself in opposition to every plan or wish of mine. You disgust by your arrogance the people whom it is my special interest to be on good terms with; and you seek the company of fashionable fools who teach you to squander my money and despise my friends. Take care, Georgina! I warn you to take care! There are limits even to *my* indulgence."

Mr. Frost had uttered the last words in his heat, after the carriage had drawn up at his own door. And the words had been heard by the servant who opened it.

Mrs. Frost was mortified. She even shed a few tears. But her husband's wrath was flaming too high to be extinguished by a few tears at that moment.

"That is all I get," said Mrs. Frost to herself, as her maid was brushing out her hair,

"for consenting to go near that odious Bedford-square set at all! I was a fool to consent. I don't believe a word about its being important to Sidney whether Hugh Lockwood marries a princess or a pauper. It is merely to carry out some scheme of that artful little creature Mrs. Lockwood. But she shall find that whatever her influence over my husband may be, she cannot make *me* an accomplice in her plots."

## CHAPTER VIII.

## HUGH WILL NOT BE AMBITIOUS.

ABOUT the middle of June, Mr. Frost departed for Italy. He was only to be away a fortnight at first. He would then return to London: and if all went well, would go back to Naples in the autumn.

He had been to Gower-street several times before leaving England. He had spoken to Hugh about his prospects, and had said that if matters succeeded with the company who were employing him, he should be able to offer Hugh a splendid chance of distinguishing himself.

"But," said Hugh, "this great company will have a great architect of their own. There will be subordinates, of course, to do the drudgery, and the big man will get the credit: I do not say that that is unfair. Big men have to earn their bigness—mostly—and

I am the last fellow in the world to grudge them what they've earned. Besides, I do not want to be wandering about the Continent. I have served my apprenticeship, and learnt my trade, and now I want to try to make a home for myself, and a place in the world. I am not ambitious——”

“A man ought to be ambitious,” said Mr. Frost.

“There might be a good deal to be said on that subject. But at all events, a man ought not to say he is ambitious, if he isn't!”

His mother and Mr. Frost succeeded, however, in persuading Hugh to remain some months longer in his present position. He was engaged by Digby and West at a weekly salary, and no permanent arrangement had yet been come to. He would let things go on as they were for a while.

Zillah had gained a reprieve, but her anxieties remained active. At the best, she had trouble before her. If all went well, and her money—Hugh's money—were restored by the end of the year, it would still devolve on her to give her son some explanation as to this accession of fortune.

Her son's love and respect were very precious to her: even as her husband's had been.

She knew that Hugh inherited his father's stern hatred of deception. What would he say when he knew that his mother had concealed so important a matter—and one which he surely had a right to be made acquainted with—all these years? And if he asked her, "Mother, *why* have you done this?" how should she answer him?

She was a woman of acute and observant intelligence in most cases. In all that concerned her only son, she was, of course, peculiarly quick to see and to understand. She knew that Hugh had fallen in love, and that his love was not the light, boyish fancy that Mr. Frost had tried to persuade her it would prove to be. Hugh had said no word to her on the subject, but there needed no word to convince her that she was right. And she liked Maud. She did not love her. She was not clingingly affectionate by nature, and all the love in her heart was absorbed by her son. But she had a kindly regard for the girl. She admired and approved her. She was not grudging or unjust because this stranger with the deep blue eyes and golden hair had become paramount in Hugh's thoughts. She knew him to be steadfast and true: and she was well assured that neither

lover nor wife would push herself from her due place in her son's love and respect. But as she watched Hugh's growing love for Maud, the thought of falling from her own high honourable place in his regard became more and more painful and intolerable to her. Hugh had implicit faith in his mother's purity and goodness. She was his high model of womanhood; and he had often said to her, "I only hope my wife may be as good as my mother! I can't wish for anything better." But could he still say so when he knew——?

There was a little human jealousy within her breast which made her feel that to humble herself now before Hugh, and say to him, "My son, I have sinned. Forgive me!" would be to yield to that other woman whom he loved, a too absolute supremacy: to abdicate in her favour the sole pride and glory of her life. She did not hate Maud for stealing Hugh's heart. The wife would be nearest and dearest; that, she was resigned, if not content, to bear. *She* would still be his honoured mother. But she thought she should come to hate Maud if Hugh ever were to diminish, by one iota, his tribute of filial reverence. And all this time Maud knew no more of the position she occupied in the

thoughts of the mother and son than we any of us know of the place we hold in each other's minds.

After the party at Mr. Lovegrove's, Maud had seriously begged her aunt not to take her out to any similar gathering again.

"I would not say this, dear Aunt Hilda," said Maud, "if I thought that *you* derived any gratification from the society of those people. But I watched you the other night, and I saw—I fancied—that you looked very weary and uninterested."

"Not uninterested as long as my pet was there. I like to see ye admired, Maud."

"Admired! Dear Aunt Hilda——"

"Well I know, I grant ye, that the folks there were not of the class you ought to associate with. And if I were but in my rightful and proper position, what a delight it would be for me to present ye to the world you were born to live in! But as to presenting, my dear child, sure how would I go to court in a street cab? and living in Gower-street! I don't say anything against it, and some of the old family mansions are in drearier places, but, after all, you know, there would be a degree of incongruity about attempting to entertain, or anything of that sort, in a lodging of this



kind; and ye know, Maud, *he* barely allows me enough for the necessaries of life as it is. Some women would run him into debt. But I couldn't bring myself to do that—barring absolute necessity: not to mention that *I'd* have to bear all the bullying and annoyance, seeing that he's safe and comfortable away beyond seas!"

Maud endeavoured to persuade her aunt that it was no feeling of pride which rendered her unwilling to go to the Lovegroves. She disclaimed such a sentiment with much warmth. No; it was simply that the people she met there were uncongenial to her. That might be partly her own fault, but the fact remained so.

Maud did not say that the anxiety of suspense about Veronica made it irksome to her to see strangers. It was a subject that could not be mentioned between her aunt and herself. But as the weeks wore on, and no answer came to her letter, her heart sank. She had scarcely been aware how strong a hope had sprung up within her on the receipt of Veronica's letter, until she began to measure the depth of her disappointment as the time rolled by and brought no further communication.

In the old days at Shipley, Maud would have enjoyed the oddity and newness of the society she had met at the Lovegroves'. But now such enjoyment was impossible to her. She was conscious of nervously shrinking from a new face, of nervously dreading a chance word which might touch on the still recent shame and sorrow that had befallen them all, as a wounded person starts away from the approach of even the gentlest hand lest it should lay itself unawares upon his hurt.

Mr. Frost's sudden mention of his proposed journey to Italy had disturbed her for this reason: though she told herself how absurd and weak it was to be so disturbed. Hundreds of people went to Italy of course; many even of the few people she knew, were likely enough to do so. But in the frequent silent direction of her thoughts towards Veronica, she had grown to associate her entirely with the word "Italy," as though that country held but one figure for all men's observation!

The question persistently presented itself to her mind: Did Mr. Frost know the story of Veronica? Was he aware who the man was with whom she had fled?

Something a little forced and unnatural in Mr. Frost's manner of introducing the subject

of his approaching journey, had struck her. Why should he have selected her to speak to respecting Hugh Lockwood's prospects? Had he had any purpose in his mind of sounding her respecting her feeling towards Veronica, and had he chosen this excuse for giving her the information that he was bound for Italy?

The impossibility of discussing this matter with her aunt, and the necessity she was under of shutting herself up from the consolation of sympathy or companionship regarding it, made her morbidly sensitive. She brooded and tormented herself.

At last she took a resolution:—she would speak to Mrs. Lockwood. That the latter had learned the whole story from her Aunt Hilda, she was well convinced. But even were that not so, Mrs. Lockwood would have heard it all from Hugh. Mr. Frost was the Lockwoods' old and intimate friend. Maud resolved to speak to Mrs. Lockwood. One afternoon after their early dinner she stole downstairs, leaving Lady Tallis asleep according to custom. Her tap at the parlour door was answered by Mrs. Lockwood's soft voice saying, "Come in;" and she entered.

Mrs. Lockwood sat at the table, with an account-book before her. She looked, Maud thought, old and harassed.

"Do I disturb you, Mrs. Lockwood? Please say so, if I do; and I will take another opportunity——"

"You don't disturb me in the least, my dear Miss Desmond. I have just finished my accounts for the month. Do sit down and tell me what I can do for you. There is nothing the matter with my lady?" she added, hastily, looking at Maud's face.

"Nothing, nothing. Do not let me startle you. I wanted to take the liberty of speaking to you in confidence—may I?"

Mrs. Lockwood took off the spectacles she was wearing, passed her hands over her forehead and eyes, and answered quietly, "Pray speak."

Her manner was not tender nor encouraging, nor even very cordial; but it nerved Maud better than a too great show of feeling would have done. In a few words she told Mrs. Lockwood what Mr. Frost had said to her at the Lovegroves' about his journey to Italy, and so forth.

"Now what I wanted to ask you was this," said Maud: "You know Mr. Frost well, and I do not: do you suppose he had any special motive in saying all this to me, a total stranger?"

"Any special motive?" repeated Mrs.

Lockwood, reddening, and looking, for her, singularly embarrassed.

"I mean—what I mean is this, Mrs. Lockwood: the story of the great sorrow and affliction that has befallen the home that was my home from the time I was a little child until the other day, is known to you. I am afraid—that is, no doubt it is known to many, many other people. Is Mr. Frost one of those who know it? And did he mean to learn anything or tell anything about Veronica when he spoke to me of going to Italy?"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Lockwood, drawing a long breath and then covering her mouth with one white, delicate hand. "You were not thinking of yourself, then, Miss Desmond?"

"Of myself? What could Mr. Frost's plans be to me, or why should he care that I should know them?"

"It was of Hugh he spoke, I thought."

"Ah, yes; but incidentally almost. He spoke to me as of something that it concerned *me* to know! I think of Veronica so constantly, and I am obliged to lock my thoughts up from Aunt Hilda so jealously, that perhaps I grow morbid. But I thought you would forgive my speaking to you."

"As to Mr. Frost, I can answer you in two

words. He knows from the Lovegroves that you have left Mr. Levincourt's house because his daughter ran away under particularly painful circumstances. But if your aunt has been discreet" (it was a large "if," and Zillah plainly showed that she knew it was so), "neither the Lovegroves nor Mr. Frost know the name of the man she ran away with. It has been a subject of gossip, truly, but not in the circles of society where the Lovegroves move. Sir John Gale has lived so long out of England, that he is almost forgotten."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lockwood," said Maud, absently.

"I infer from what you say that you have some reason to believe that your guardian's daughter is at present in Italy?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot that you did not know. I—I had a letter from her."

Mrs. Lockwood raised her eyebrows, and looked at Maud attentively.

"I know I can trust you not to mention this to my aunt. You understand how impossible it is for me to speak of Veronica to her. Aunt Hilda is kind and gentle, and yet, on that subject, she speaks with a harshness that is very painful to me."

"Lady Tallis has been infamously treated."

"You must understand, if you please, Mrs. Lockwood, that I have told Mr. Levincourt of my letter. It is only a secret from Aunt Hilda."

"You were very fond of this young lady?" said Zillah, with her eyes observantly fixed on Maud's changing face.

"Yes;" answered Maud. Then the tears gathered to her eyes, and for the moment she could say no more.

"Your fondness has not been destroyed by this miserable business?" pursued Zillah.

Maud silently shook her head, and the tears fell faster.

"Would you see her and speak to her again if you could? Would you hold out your hand to her?"

Mrs. Lockwood, as she spoke, kept her mouth concealed beneath her hand, and her eyes on Maud's face.

Maud was aware of a certain constraint in the elder woman's tone. She thought it sounded disapproving, almost stern.

"Oh, Mrs. Lockwood," she cried, in much agitation, "do not judge her too hardly! You have such a lofty standard of duty; your son has told me how excellent your life has been; he is so proud of you! But do not

be too hard on her. If the good have no pity for her, what will become of her? I do not defend her. She failed in her duty towards her father; but she has been most basely and cruelly deceived, I am sure of it!"

"Deceived by her great love and faith in this man?" said Zillah, unwaveringly preserving the same look and attitude.

Maud grew very pale, and drooped her head. "She—she—trusted him," she murmured.

Zillah removed her hand from her mouth, and, clasping both hands, rested them on the table before her. When her mouth was no longer concealed, she cast her eyes down, and ceased to look at Maud while she spoke.

"See now, Miss Desmond," said she, in her soft voice, "how unequally justice is meted out in this world! Once I knew a girl—little more than a child in years—very ignorant, very unprotected, and very confiding. She was not a handsome haughty young lady, living in a respectable home. This girl's associates were all low, vile people. She was not by nature vicious or wicked, but she loved with her whole childish inexperienced heart, and she fell. *She* was 'most basely and cruelly deceived'—I quote your words. It was nei-



ther vanity nor vainglory that led her astray : nothing but simple, blind, misplaced affection. Well, nobody pitied her, nobody cared for her, nobody helped her. If you, or any delicately nurtured young lady like you, had met her in the street, you would have drawn your garments away from the contamination of her touch."

"No, no, no! Indeed you wrong me! If I had known her story I should have pitied her from the bottom of my heart."

Zillah proceeded without heeding the interruption. "And all her sufferings—they were acute—I knew her very well—could not atone. Her fault (I use the word for want of a better. Where *fault* lay, God knows—perhaps He cares!)——"

"Oh, Mrs. Lockwood!"

"Do I shock you? That girl's fault pursued her through life—still pursues her——"

"Is she alive?"

"Alive? No: I think she is dead, that girl. Her ghost walks sometimes. But another woman, in some respects a very different woman, inherits her legacy of trouble and shame and sorrow. That seems hard. But if you tell me that all life is hard; that we are blind to what is our bane or what our

good ; or utter any other fatalist doctrine, I can understand the reason and sequence of it. But when you preach to me that ‘Conduct makes Fate ;’ that as we reap we sow ; and so forth ; I point to these two cases. The one. an innocent—yes ; an *innocent*—child : the other a well-educated, proud, beautiful, beloved, young woman. The loving-hearted child is crushed and tortured and forsaken. The—forgive me, but I speak what you *know* to be true—the selfish, vain, arrogant, ambitious lady, commits the same sin against the world, and is rich, petted, and pampered. The rough places are made smooth for her feet. People cry ‘How sad ! A lady ! The daughter of a clergyman !’ Her friends hold out their hands to take her back. Even you—a pure, fresh, young creature like you—are ready to mourn over her, and to forgive her and caress her with angelic sweetness and pity.”

Maud could not help perceiving, that Mrs. Lockwood was mentally visiting on Veronica the hard usage of the poor betrayed young girl she had spoken of. It seemed as though in proportion to the pity that she felt for that young girl, she grudged every pitying word that was bestowed on Veronica. Maud felt it very strange that it should be so ; and she

had almost a sense of guilt herself, for having become aware of it. But her intellect was too clear for self-delusion, and, albeit most unwillingly, she could not but understand the spirit of Mrs. Lockwood's words, and be repulsed by it.

"I think—" said Maud, gently, and turning her pale face full on Mrs. Lockwood: "I am young and inexperienced I know, but I do think that having loved one suffering person very much should make us tender to other sufferers."

"Sufferers!" repeated Mrs. Lockwood, with a cold contempt, and closed her mouth rigidly when she had spoken.

"Yes," answered Maud, firmly. The colour rose very faintly in her cheek and her blue eyes shone. "My unhappy friend is a sufferer. Not the less a sufferer because there is truth in some of the words you have applied to her. Pride and ambition do not soften such a fall as hers."

Again Maud could not help perceiving that Mrs. Lockwood was balancing Veronica's fate against the fate of the betrayed young girl, and that she derived a strange satisfaction from the suggestion that Veronica's haughty spirit could be tortured by humiliation.

"There would be a grain of something like justice in that," said Zillah, under her breath.

Maud withdrew with a pained feeling. Her mind had at first been relieved by the mere fact of uttering the name of one who dwelt so constantly in her thoughts. But Mrs. Lockwood's manner had so repulsed her that she inwardly resolved never again to approach the subject of Veronica's fate in speaking to her. But to her surprise, the topic seemed to have a mysterious attraction for Mrs. Lockwood. Whenever she found herself alone with Maud, she was sure, sooner or later, to come round to it.

Once she said, after a long pause of silence during which her fingers were busied with needlework and her eyes cast down on it, "If that poor young girl—she is dead now, you know—could have had a friend like you, Miss Desmond, years and years ago, it might have gone differently with her. It would have given her courage to know that such a pure-hearted woman pitied rather than blamed her."

"I should think all honest hearts must be filled with compassion at her story," answered Maud, in a low voice.

"Do you think a man's heart would be?

Do you think that, for instance, my—my son's would be?"

"Surely! Can you doubt it?"

"Poor girl! She was so ignorant of the world! She knew there was a great gulf between her and such as you are. She had never lived with good people. They were as distant from her as the inhabitants of the moon might be. If she had had a friend like you, Miss Desmond, that poor girl who is dead, it would have given her courage, and it might have gone differently with her."

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